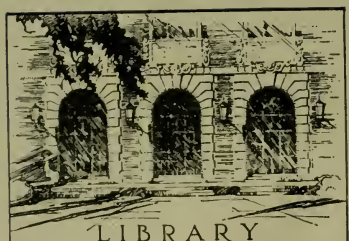
Margaret Maliphant



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MARGARET MALIPHANT

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A NOVEL

BY

MRS COMYNS CARR

AUTHOR OF 'LA FORTUNINA,' 'NORTH ITALIAN FOLK,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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MARGARET MALIPHANT.

CHAPTER XXIX.

And now let me pause awhile and think. Ten years have passed since the time of which I write. I am a woman, twenty-nine years old—a woman in judgment as well as in years, for many things have happened since then which have taught me more than the mere passage of time. And I can see clearly enough now that what I am going to tell happened through no fault of others; my pain and my disappointment were the result only of my own mistake: let me state that as a fact—it will be a satisfaction to my own conscience. I never had any excuse

for that mistake. I was a foolish, passionate, romantic girl, and out of the whirlwind of my own love I conjured up the answering love that I craved; but it was never there,—it was a phantom of my own making.

A month had passed since Joyce had come home, since that night when Trayton Harrod and I stood under the Abbey eaves in the lightning and the storm,—a long, long summer's month. The hay had all been gathered in long ago, and the harvest was golden and ready for the reaping; the plain that had once been so green was growing mellower every day; the thick, reedy grass that blooms with a rich dark tassel upon our marsh, made planes of varied brown tints over the flatness of the pastures—the whole land was warm with colour; the grey castle lay sleeping upon the flaxen turf, with the grey beach beyond; the white sheep cropped lazily what blades they could find; between the two lines of tall rushes yellow and white water-lilies floated upon the dykes, and meadow-sweet bloomed upon their banks; the scarlet poppies had faded from the corn-

fields, and the little harvest-mouse built her nest upon the tall ears of wheat.

Every sign told that the summer would soon be fading into autumn; the young broods were all abroad long ago; the swallows and the martens were preparing for a second hatching; the humming of the snipe, as his tardy mate sat on her nest, made a pleasant bleating sound along the dykes near to the sea; the swift — first of all birds to leave us—would soon be taking her southward flight; on the beach the yellow sea-poppies bloomed amid their pale-green leaves.

There had been the same little trouble over the bringing of reaping and threshing machines on to the farm as there had been over the mowing. Poor father did not appear to be reconciled to these innovations, although he seemed to have made up his mind to give in to Trayton Harrod up to a certain point; he had not, however, wavered an inch on the subject of the length of the labourers' working hours: on that he and the bailiff still preserved an ill-concealed attitude of hostility.

I did what I could to preserve the peace,

so did mother, so did we all; but I don't think that father grew to like Trayton Harrod any better as time went on. I think he respected him thoroughly. More than once, I recollect, he took occasion to observe that he was an upright and honourable man, and yet, somehow, he scarcely seemed even to thoroughly trust him.

I know at least that one morning about this time he called me into his study and bade me ride into town at once with a letter for Mr Hoad, which I was to deliver privately into his own hands, letting nobody know my errand. Three months ago how proud I should have been of this trust, which might have been given to the man who had been called in to supplant me! But now I did not like it; it filled me with apprehensions, with misgivings, with anger at the slight to him.

"Are you afraid to go, Meg?" father had asked, seeing me hesitate. "I'll go myself."

The word must have lit up my grey eyes with the light that he was wont to laugh at, for he put down his stick and sank into his chair.

"There," said he, patting my cheek, "I thought she hadn't lost her pride."

And neither had I; but the strangeness of the request, and the strangeness of Mr Hoad's face as he read the letter, set me thinking most uncomfortably all the way home. Nor was it only on that occasion that I had need to ponder somewhat anxiously on matters that were not my own.

A Sunday morning about this time comes back to my mind. Father had been up to London during the week on one or two matters of business. It was an event in those days for a farmer to go up to London. To father it was specially an event, for he always had been a more than usually stay-at-home man. But there must have been some special reason that took him up: he had seemed disquieted for some time.

I had fancied that it was purely on account of that scheme that Frank Forrester had not yet succeeded in floating, and I was angry with Frank for that cooling down which I had noticed as happening in him whenever he got away from the fiery influence. I was angry with Joyce for not keeping him up to

his first ardour; angry with mother for not allowing them to correspond, so that she might do so. But after all, I don't believe that father's uneasiness was entirely owing to Frank Forrester, for his journey to London was suddenly decided upon one afternoon after he and Mr Hoad had had a long talk together in the business-room. Father had seen Harrod afterwards, and had then announced his proposed journey at the tea-table.

He had only been away two days; but although he said that he had been made a great deal of by the old friend with whom he had stayed, and though he declared that Frank was just the same as ever, and it was therefore to be supposed that they had been as good comrades as usual,—father looked none the better for his little change.

As we all stood up in the old church to say the Creed, I remember noticing how ill he looked.

It was not only that he bent his tall, massive figure over the desk, leaning heavily upon it with both hands, as if for needful support; it was not even that his cheeks

were more sunken, and that he bowed his head wearily; it was that, in his dull eyes and set lips, there was an air of suffering, of dejection and hopelessness, that was pathetic even to me who should have known nothing of pathos at nineteen. It struck me with sad forebodings, and those words of the Squire's a few weeks before came back to my mind.

I glanced at mother's face—beautiful and serene as ever—with the little network of delicate wrinkles spread over its soft surface, and the blue eyes content as a young girl's beneath the shadow of the thick white hair. It was what Joyce's face might grow to be some day, although at that time there were lines of character about the mouth which my sister's beauty lacked,—it was what my face could never grow to. But surely neither of those two had any misgivings. "And the life of the world to come," repeated mother gravely, saying the words a little after everybody else in a kind of conclusive way. But somehow I wondered whether she had really been thinking of what they meant, for she sat down again with almost a smile upon her

lips, and smoothed out her soft old black brocade without any air of undue solemnity.

I glanced at Joyce. Her eyes were bent down looking at her hands — large, well-shaped, useful hands, that looked better in the dairy or at her needle than they did in ill-fitting kid gloves; her face was undisturbed, the lovely little chin resting on the white bow of the ribbon that tied on her fresh chip bonnet. It was before the days when it was considered respectable to go to church in a hat.

I too had a white chip bonnet—Joyce had brought them both from London, together with the blue merino frocks, which we also wore that day; but I did not look as well in a chip bonnet as Joyce did.

I glanced along the row of pews. At the end of the one parallel with ours across the aisle sat Reuben in his clean smock, his fine old parchment-coloured face set in the quiet lines induced by sleepiness and the suitable mood for the occasion. Deborah, as I have said, came rarely to church; she always declared that a deafness, which I had never noticed in her, made the coming but a mere form, for "what was the use if you couldn't

extinguish the parson?" But Reuben was a pious and constant attendant, and looked better in keeping with the place than did the owner of two keen grey eyes, just beyond him, that I noticed were fixed upon my sister's face.

They were withdrawn as soon as I turned my head, although they did not look at me, but I paid no further attention to the service that day, and for all the good I got of the sermon I might as well have stayed at home.

And yet we had a fine discourse—or so father said as we came out of church—for it was from the curate of the next parish, that young Mr Cyril Morland to whom he had taken such a fancy, and it was for the ragged schools, and touched on father's subject in father's own way. If I had cared to look round at him again, I should have seen that his weary eyes had regained all their usual fire, and that his head was raised gazing at the impassioned young speaker.

But I did not look at father again. I sat with my eyes fixed on the old tombstone at my right, on which reposed the mail-clad figure of an ancient knight; and for aught I

knew or cared, the preacher might have been the sleepy old vicar himself, clearing his throat and humbly enunciating his well-worn sentiments. I don't remember just what my thoughts were, perhaps I could not have put them into words even then, but I know they were not of God nor of the poor little wretched children for whom our charity was asked. When the plate came round at the end it awoke me from a dream; ah me! it was not a good dream nor a happy dream. I wondered if people were often so wicked in church.

When the service was over, father went round to the back and took up little David Jarrett whom he had carried into church. The little fellow was supposed to be better, but he did not look as though he would be long for this world, and I think he grew nearer every day to father's heart.

The vicar's young wife spoke to him as he went out in father's arms.

"You've got a very kind friend, David," she said to the child in her weak, whining voice. "I hope you're very grateful."

A smile came over the little pinched face.

The boy did not reply, but he put his arm round father's neck to make the burden easier, and looked into his eyes.

"I'm going to take you to the Grange to-day for a bit of roast-beef, David. What do you say?" asked father.

"I should like to go to the Grange," said David, without making any allusion to the roast-beef.

"Come, you youngster," said the Squire, coming down the path with Mary Thorne, and speaking in his hearty, healthy voice, "isn't that leg of yours well enough yet for you to walk alone and not trouble a poor old man?"

The child flushed scarlet, and father said in a vexed tone, "I'm not so very old yet, Squire, but I can carry a poor little cripple a couple of hundred yards."

The Squire had only spoken in joke, and he said so; it was his way, for in reality he was as kind a man as father himself, but I don't think father forgave him for quite a little while.

"Well, did you see anything of that good-for-nothing nephew of mine up in London?" asked the Squire again.

We were all standing round in a little group, as folk are wont to do coming out of church, when they rarely get time to meet on week-days. Mother was talking to that aggressive old lady, Miss Farnham,—Joyce stood at her side. I could not see Harrod anywhere, but it was just like him to have disappeared; he hated a concourse of people.

"Oh, come, Mr Broderick, I don't think you ought to take away a poor fellow's character when he's absent," laughed Mary Thorne in her jolly way. "Here's Miss Maliphant," added she, pointing at Joyce, "might be prejudiced against him by it, and he thinks a very great deal of what Miss Maliphant's opinion of him may be, I assure you."

She said it in a good-natured, bantering kind of way, but not at all as if she guessed at the real relations that existed between Joyce and her childhood's friend.

The Squire frowned, and mother turned away from Miss Farnham.

"Now, Miss Thorne, I should take it very kindly if you wouldn't bring my girl into it,"

said she. "I'm an old-fashioned woman, and I don't hold with jokes of that sort."

Mary looked rather surprised, but it was just like mother to speak up like that; she never was afraid of anything or anybody, although she did seem so gentle.

"Ah, I often have my suspicions that Mrs Maliphant is a good old Tory at heart," said the Squire, trying to turn the matter off lightly.

"No, no, Squire, don't you try to make more out of my words than's in them," declared mother, shaking her head. "I never was for politics. I make neither head nor tail of them."

Of course everybody laughed at this; and the Squire added, "I'll be bound Frank won't show himself till after we have got my friend Farnham in for the county."

"He said nothing about coming down," said father, who had withdrawn from the group since the Thornes had joined it, and stood by the old stone-wall, on which he had rested little David; "but I don't think that's the reason."

"He'd have been down before now to

torment me about those new stables unless there were something particular keeping him away," went on Mr Broderick. "He keeps writing to me about them, but I tell him I'll have the men and women housed before the dogs and horses. There are two new cottages wanted on the estate, and they're going to be done first."

"Ah, you're a decent sort of landlord; they're few enough like you," declared Miss Farnham, nodding her ever-bugled head before she turned up her black silk gown over her white petticoat, and trudged off across the churchyard; "and that's a sight better than going about making mischief, as some seditious folk must needs do."

This was a parting thrust at father, but he did not seem to have even noticed it.

"Mother, I'll just take the little chap home," said he. "You get hold of Mr Morland, and ask him to come and have a bit of dinner with us, will you?"

The Squire looked after him. "You oughtn't to let him carry that child about, Mrs Maliphant," said he. "He's not the man he was."

"Oh Squire, what a Job's comforter you are, to be sure," sighed mother, half fretfully. "Why, I think Laban's quite himself again since the summer weather has come in. He's a bit cast down to-day, I've noticed it myself. But that's in his spirits. I don't think that trip to London did him any good. Those railways are tiring things, and then I can't help fancying he's a bit disappointed about this notion of his for getting the charity school, or whatever it is. He's so set on those things. I tell him it's a pity. He wears himself out and neglects his own work. And no offence to you, Squire, that young nephew of yours isn't so smart about it as he might be. I always warned Laban against putting too much trust in him. Not that he has said anything, but if matters were going as he wants, he would have had something to say, you see. The young man seemed just as eager about it as my old one once upon a time, but young folks haven't the grit."

Mother made the whole of this long speech in a confidential manner to the Squire, but I heard every word of it. So must Joyce have done, for she and Mary

Thorne had been talking, and were standing side by side, but she gave no sign at all, although Mary said, with a loud laugh, "Is that Frank you're talking of? Why, dear me, you don't expect him to hold long to one thing, do you? The Squire knows him better than that. As jolly an old chap as ever was, but never of the same mind for ten minutes together; at least," added she quite gravely for her, "not about things of that sort. Dear me, I know at least five things he has taken up wildly for the time being, and wearied of in six months."

The Squire smiled a little maliciously. "There's a bit of truth in that," he agreed, "though I don't know that I could have told it off so glibly. Oh, Miss Mary, Miss Mary, what a wicked tongue you have got!"

I fancied she looked distressed. "Come, who was it stood up for him just now?" cried she. "You can't call black white because you happen to like a person."

He laughed. I couldn't help thinking that he was very well pleased with what she had said, and I thought it was very unkind of him. As for me, I was furious with the girl.

I had always liked her before, but that day I positively hated her. What business had she to go telling tales about Frank?

It never occurred to me for a moment that she might possibly have a reason for wanting to set Joyce against Frank,—for making her think that his liking for people as well as for pursuits was of a very transitory nature.

I went home in a very bad temper. Why was I so specially angry now every time that Joyce was lukewarm where her absent lover was concerned? I had often secretly accused her in my heart of being lukewarm before. She was not of a forthcoming temperament; she never had expressed her emotions freely, and she never would do so—it was not in her nature.

Why did it trouble me more now than it used to do? Why did it trouble me so much that, when I reflected that Joyce had not said a single word during the whole of that scene, I could not find it in my heart to speak to her?

A month ago I should have scolded her for letting mother awe her into silence,—I should have laughed at her for her timidity. But that day I could not.

I let her go up-stairs alone into our little bedroom to take off her bonnet, and found an excuse to lay mine aside down-stairs.

I heard the Rev. Cyril Morland talking the management of the Ragged Schools over with father, and considering his suggestions of improvement. At any other time I should have been proud to notice the deference that he showed to the old man. I should have liked to listen to the comparison of their ideas and plans. But then I was afraid.

The pity of suffering, the zeal for succouring it, seemed to me so much more akin between the curate and father than they had ever really been between him and Frank.

I could not bear to acknowledge it, yet I could not but instinctively feel that it was so.

I did not guess at possible rocks and quicksands of creeds that might be ahead in any intercourse between father and his new friend, but I felt that in him was the spirit of endurance and self-sacrifice which, girl as I was, I could not but fear was lacking in the sympathising, sympathetic nature of my sister's lover. It was only since he had been at the Grange the last time that I had begun to fear

it; but after that, that waxing and waning in the heat of his enterprise was apparent even to me.

I felt that mother was right when she said that you knew where you were with a man who had troubled himself to put some of his ideas into practice, and could not blame her for being glad that father had put his scheme into the hands of one who had shown that he could work as well as talk. I could not blame her,—she had no reason for making excuses for Frank Forrester; on the contrary, she had every reason for wishing father to see him in what she called his true colours, so that their intercourse should be at an end.

But I—I had a reason best known to myself for wishing to strengthen every little thread that could bind Frank to father and the Grange. And even though this fervent young curate should turn out to be that man of whom Frank himself had spoken,—he who was the "right man to do the work,"—I could not like him. How could I like any one who showed signs of taking Frank's place with father?

I sat silent at the board, and well deserved mother's just reproof afterwards for my lapse into the old, ill-mannered ways out of which she hoped I was growing.

I was cross,—I was cross with Joyce; but it was unjustly so, and I felt it. When I had said my prayers that night, I went up and kissed her where she lay with her golden heaps of hair upon the white pillow.

CHAPTER XXX.

THERE is no season so bad but there are some fine days in it, and there is no time so heavy but it has some happy hours. That stormy summer-time had its happy hours, although I must needs tell also of its clouds.

The earth was the same, although the eyes with which I saw it saw another image before they reached it, and sometimes the sense of its eternal beauty came to my spirit with a soothing song, and whispered of an enduring life that was beyond the changes and chances of varying weathers, bidding me be still and wait. I don't know that I was still, I don't know that at that time I was content to wait; but those voices that were so familiar made me glad as nothing else did, and, though I knew it not, made me strong.

The wind that breathed soft from over the downs, heavy with the scent of the hops; the wind that smote salt upon my cheek with the fresh sea-brine; the lap of the waves upon the sand's soft lip, or their fretful flow upon the steeper beach whence they would suck the pebbles back again to the ocean's heart; the rush and rustle of birds in the air—rooks, or starlings, or fieldfares in great congregations that blackened the sky; the clouds hastening over the blue that lay so wide a covering over the wide level land, and made the red roofs of the town purple beneath their touch; the rippling of a breeze in the ash-trees, and the moaning of it in the pines; the pattering of rain, the lowing of cattle; the hundred notes of birds, and sounds of beasts upon the land; the throbbing sunlight, and the cold moon;—all these things, and many, many more, spoke to me, gay or pitiful, in tones that I had learnt from my childhood up, and told me of that wide sea of life that was there for me, whether I would or no, beyond the present, beyond selfish longings, beyond happiness or unhappiness.

Yes, I think something of all this came to

me even then, although I could not have told it in words, as I try to do now—ten years afterwards.

It was late August—the last of the harvesting. I had gone down to those wheat-fields upon the marsh that lie almost alongside of the beach.

The day's work was nearly done, the reapers were binding up the last sheaves, and only a few solitary gleaners were still busy where the hated machines had left off their monotonous grind. I don't know how it was the men had done work so early that day, for it was an hour off sundown yet, but I think it was the very last field they had to reap upon father's land.

Trayton Harrod had been there, but I had not spoken to him all the afternoon, and now as I stood looking at him from afar through the late golden sunshine, and one of those strange showers of cobwebs that sometimes fall about this time of year upon our Sussex levels—I saw the Squire upon the path hard by that led to the beach. I had seen him coming down the road before with his bailiff, but had scarcely noticed him then — he was

such a familiar figure in the landscape. Only when he was comparatively close at hand something occurred to me with regard to him.

I gave up a foolish wish that I had had to walk up to the village with Trayton Harrod after work was done, and jumped the dyke, beyond which only a narrow strip of pasture-land was between me and the road. I remember how I stopped to pluck meadow-sweet and flowering willow as I stepped across, that I might just climb the bank not too long before the Squire should have reached that point.

"Been harvesting, Miss Margaret?" said he, in, I fancied, rather a preoccupied manner. "We have all got plenty of that to do just now, haven't we?"

The Squire had more of it to do than we had, for he had more wheat, and the ugly weather having given place that week to a fresh burst of summer, all we who had still crops on the ground were anxious to take advantage of the unexpected good fortune. I did not reply. I was thinking how to begin what I had to say, and I took my

knife out of my pocket, and stooped to cut a tall teazle that was turning brown on the dyke-side and a spray of ruddy dock that grew beside it.

"The weather is splendid now for harvesting," said I, finding the Squire did not speak again, "and Mr Harrod says the crop of wheat will be finer than he once thought."

"Why shouldn't he have thought it would be fine?" grumbled the Squire, looking in the direction where our bailiff stood in the wheat-field talking to the bailiff from the Manor. "We have rarely had such a hot summer."

The field was hot and golden, the hill behind cool and dark.

I pulled one of the heads of dock to pieces in my hand, and said, "He says that a hot early summer doesn't always do good; it sucks the juices out while the straw is milky, and impoverishes the strength of the plant."

The Squire laughed, and I grew scarlet with vexation.

"Why, you'll be quite a farmer under Harrod's auspices," he said. "You were nearly fit to manage the farm before he

came, and I'm sure you'll soon be able to turn him off."

"No, indeed," said I, trying to speak quietly. "I'm only just beginning to learn that I know nothing."

"Ah! Well, they say that's the first step to growing clever," he replied. "And, joking apart, of course Harrod's a very able fellow, and can teach us both a lot of things, I've no doubt, though he does have queer notions at times, I'm bound to say. He is a business man, and no mistake."

"Of course Mr Harrod is a good man of business," said I haughtily. "We all know that. That's why you recommended him to father, I suppose."

Whenever the Squire was rough on Harrod for his energy—which somehow seemed to me to be rather often of late—I always reminded him that he had recommended him for that very quality. I don't think he liked to be so reminded. I don't know why, but I am sure he did not like it.

"Mr Broderick," I said, striking a bold tangent, "when is Captain Forrester coming down again to the Manor?"

He looked at me surprised.

"I don't know, I'm sure," he said. "He never used to come at all. He has never been at the Manor before for so long a time as he was here this spring."

"No, perhaps not," I said.

He looked at me sharply, and remembering the warning he had given me against any intimacy between my sister and Frank, it suddenly occurred to me that he might possibly be to blame for Frank being so long absent.

This thought made a sudden flame of anger leap up within me towards the Squire. I could not help being angry with him if he were doing anything to help Joyce and Frank apart. I longed to tell him so, but with that promise to mother at my back I did not dare.

"He might come for the election," said I. "I think he ought to come for the election."

The Squire laughed again.

"On which side do you suppose he would throw in his interest, Miss Margaret?" he said.

I saw that I had said a silly thing, and flushed. Of course if Frank put any interest

in the election, it would be on the side that was not the Squire's.

"But, upon my soul, I scarcely know myself," added he. "The lad is a slippery sort of fellow."

This speech pleased me no more than the former one. It pleased me none the more because it awakened a certain uneasiness that I had felt myself about Frank. Girl as I was, I too had fancied he was not always the same; but I stood up for him.

"I think it's very unfair of you to say that of your own nephew," I said.

The Squire fixed his blue eyes upon me with an amused expression.

"Why, Miss Margaret, you're a very staunch champion of that young scapegrace," said he. "What makes you so bold at fighting his battles, and so eager that he should come back again to the Manor?"

"I fight his battles because I think you are unjust," I said. "And I want him to come back because father looks to him to help him in his work."

"Oh, I see," said the Squire, somewhat doubtfully. "But you mustn't fancy that he

is so necessary to your father as all that. I am sure my friend Maliphant is far too wise a man to set much store by the talk and opinions of a young and idle fellow like my nephew. He is far more likely to value the advice of a man such as this new parson over at Iden. I am glad to see they have struck up quite a friendship together. I wish he wouldn't wear such a long coat, but I can see that he is an honest chap in spite of it."

At any other time I might have been willing to enter into a discussion as to the merits of the Rev. Cyril Morland, but at that moment I was only annoyed with the Squire for having noticed father's liking for him. However, he gave me no more time for further talk. Whether I had said anything to annoy him, or whether he was really busy, I don't know; but he bade me good-bye abruptly, only asking me, if I should meet Harrod, to tell him that he would call round at "The Elms" and see him later on.

I strolled down to the sea-shore that hemmed the margin of the marsh, and sat down upon the beach to listen to the wash of

the water upon the pebbles as the tide went out. It was one of those serene evenings that are made for dreaming; the sea was calm, and melted into the sky with a little haze upon the horizon; streaks of varied shades crossed it in lines, brown upon the shallows, palest green beyond, blue where the water deepened, and darker still where the shadow of passing clouds fell upon its bosom. A fishing-boat, with brown sail flapping idly, lay becalmed in the offing; a steamer crossed the distance. The light-house at the end of the long, faint pink line, that was the far point that swept out into the ocean, seemed scarcely to be on land at all, but a mere speck of white in a veil of haze at sea; even the shipping in the harbour, but two miles away, had a phantom look, although the distant cliffs to my right could not but be stable and stately even in that languid atmosphere.

It was all so peaceful and pleasant that I forgot the storms that oftentimes raged upon it, and although I was not actively happy I was passively content, involuntarily wrapped around by the soothing influence of the world

that had been all the world to me until six months ago.

I began thinking of the days—not so very long past—when I knew no excitement so great as to be out with the fisher lads fishing for mackerel. Mother would not allow me to go out when it was very stormy, so it was days of comparative calm that I remembered, and one night in special when I had leave to go out with Reuben and an old fisherman by torchlight. It was in the month of November—a cold, clear night—and we fished for herring. There had been just enough of a swell not to make the adventure tame, but the stars had shone calmly, and the haul had been a good one. At the time I had thought much more about the haul of fish than about the stars, but now I remembered that the stars had shone calmly. A longing came over me to be once more on the sea.

The old fisherman with whom I had been out that night was dead, I knew; but there were others whom I had known, and with a sudden impulse I got up from the shingle, and began walking towards the fishing-village hard by. It was but a handful of little

low cottages, with a rough inn in the middle —a wild, strange place, alone on the border of the marsh with the wind and the sea.

I met one of my friends coming along the beach; he was going for his shrimping-net, for the tide was ebbing, and in another hour the work would begin. He came slouching along, with his old, faded blue jersey rolled up around his waist, and his woollen cap cocked over his eyes to keep out the slanting rays of the late sun.

"Good day to you, Eben," I called out. His name was Ebenezer, but everybody called him Eben. "Are you going to take up the nets this afternoon, or is it too calm?"

The old fellow — not so very old, but weather-beaten into an appearance that might mean any age from forty to sixty— pursed up his dry lips and looked out over the water. The yellow sail of the fishing-boat yonder had swelled out; there was a little breeze getting up.

"We might put out," he said, "though it's touch and go if it'd be worth while. Do you want to go out?"

"Yes, I should like to go," said I. "It's a long while since I've been on the water."

Eben looked at me. I don't know if he saw anything in my face different from what used to be there, but he said quite sympathetically: "Well, 'tis mopin' work being always on dry land."

I laughed. "I'd rather have the land than the sea all the year round," I said. "But I should like to taste the salt again."

"I've my shrimpin' to do," said he. "And we can't go afore the turn o' the tide, anyhow."

"All right," answered I. "I'll wait a bit."

"There won't be more than a handful of codling, and pr'aps a sole," declared the old man doubtfully.

"Never mind," answered I.

"How's the old chap up at the farm?" said he, as he was moving off. One might have imagined that he meant Reuben, but I knew well enough that he meant father.

"Father's well," I said.

"He have got a bailiff to look after the place now, haven't he?" asked Eben. "Don't work very well, do it?"

"Why, yes; it works all right," said I.

I did not ask whether it was Reuben who had said it did not work, but of course I knew, and wondered what I could do to punish Reuben for it.

"He's a nice-spoken chap," added the man. "I've seed him about here many's the time, and he's always spoke civil to me. Aint that him coming along now?"

I turned round sharply. Yes, walking along the beach towards us was Trayton Harrod. He, too, was taking a rest after his day's work. The glare on the shingle dazzled me so that I could not see him, for the sun was behind me, sinking towards the hill, and shone on to the face of the pebbles, making the long stretch of beach shine rosy-grey. Was he coming towards us? No, most likely he had not recognised me talking to the fisherman. Should I go to meet him? I had the Squire's message to deliver. But I thought I would not go. Of late there had come upon me a resolve to wait until he should seek me. Foolish and useless effort of pride! Was I even true to it? He turned across the beach back again

to the road, but in the direction of the cliff.

"Well, I'll be back again in an hour or so, Eben," I said. "You'll know by that time whether you mean to go out or not."

He nodded, and shouldered the pole of his big, square net. I stood and watched him wade into the water. But when he had distanced me by some couple of hundred yards, plodding through the rippling waves, and pushing the big square net in front of him, then I turned and crossed the shingle back to the short brown turf where the rabbit-warrens are thick upon the uneven ground, and the blue bugloss and sea-gilliflower bloom sparsely upon the dry soil.

I had suddenly resolved to use up the spare hour in a sharp walk to the cliffs. I did not know, or did not confess to myself, that I had any special object in view in coming to this determination; but I think my heart beat a little as I walked, wondering whether some one else was advancing in the same direction behind me. I walked without turning, however, till I came to certain pools in the beach that tides no longer

reach—pools housed behind banks of shingle, and scarcely even remembering the sea their mother; quiet havens where rushes grow and moor-hen make their nests, and the stately purple heron comes for his meal at dawn and sunset.

One flew across from trees inland, obliquely, slowly sailing, just as I reached the last of these seeming remnants of a primitive world, and stood bathing his feet on the shallow lip, erect and imposing, the only inhabitant fitted to the spot. He did not see me nor move, even though I stooped down as I neared him to pluck a bunch of the yellow sea-poppies that bloomed amid the very peebles.

The beach stretched blue now in front of me as I raised my head, for the sun was before me—nearing the edge of the hill; I looked back along the way, that was pink, but Trayton Harrod was not in sight, and with something that was very like disappointment at my heart I went on again, following the dyke that now ran not far from the shore, until I came to where it widens into a channel between a green sward on

one side and the high ridge of shingle on the other. Its end is in a deep pool sheltered beneath the hood of a grey cliff—a cliff adorned at its base with the blackberry and ash, and whitening at its top into the chalk that here begins to give its glistening frontal to the gales of the turbulent sea.

Upon a bank of bracken that September promised to gild with amber, I sat down to rest. Poor foolish child! How faint was my heart when my hope was vain—how wild when I saw it fulfilled! For he came at last, leisurely, reading as he came.

I had not been mistaken: for him too this was a favourite spot, this corner forsaken of the world, but loved all the more of the sleepy marsh and of the sleepless sea, of the raging winds of heaven and of the tender summer sunshine.

"Why, Miss Margaret," said he, as he came up, with something of surprise, but also —ah, yes—something of pleasure in his tone. "Fancy finding you such a long way from home!"

"Oh, I often come here," I said. "It is but a step."

I was longing to remind him that it was but just yonder on the marsh that I had met him for the first time, but I could not. "What is that?" I asked abruptly, instead, as a bird flew out of one of the caves that the sea once filled, and hovered over our heads. It hung there some forty feet aloft, winnowing the air gently; then fell like a stone upon the field. "A hawk, I call it," added I. "But I know you have some strange name for it."

When we were together we went back naturally, I think, with one accord to our little altercations about the names and manners of beasts and birds; it was on such little things that the first good beginning of our friendship had been built. It set me at my ease that day.

"It's a kestrel, not a sparrow-hawk," said Harrod. "It's a pity keepers ever mistake them. The kestrels are useful birds. They kill mice. That was a mouse it got now."

"What is your name for it?" I repeated.

"Windhover," he answered.

"Ah, yes, it's a pretty name," I said.

And we went on discussing the habitations

of the bird, and how it loved to dwell in old buildings; and as we talked we climbed the flight of rough steps, hewn, winding up the face of the rock, and stood on the bald top, with the wind fresh in our faces and nothing but sea, sea all around, in the midst of which we almost seemed to stand as on an island. The little struggle with the breeze did me good, and the familiar way in which he went from one subject to another of our everyday interests put stormier thoughts for a moment out of sight.

As we walked back along the beach—colourless now that the sun had sunk, with the silvery curves of the gull's white wings bright upon the blue waters—the sympathy that he sought from me once more, as of old, upon the things of his ambition, the daily and engrossing interest of his work, all made me happy again, as I had not been happy for many a day, and I think that for the moment I scarcely thought of anything better than that this sympathy should go on like that for ever.

A flight of starlings, beginning with companies of fifties, till, as day waned, the army counted thousands, blackened the sky. Fly-

ing towards us, with wings perpendicular and widespread, they were a dark cloud high in the air; but presently, as though by silent command, they changed their course, and in the twinkling of an eye the cloud became a mere patch of faint grey upon the sky, although the birds were still as close to us as before: they had but altered the poise of their bodies, and the wings, presented horizontally, made only little lines where before they had been black blotches. But once more they varied their flight; the sky darkened again, the compact mass became a long, sweeping curve that, with one great rush and rustle, descended across the belt of trees that clothe the Manor cliff above the marsh, and with a roar of wings and a very Babel of chirping that was like the noise of a mountain torrent, they buried themselves completely out of sight in the bank of tall reeds and bulrushes that here clothe the dyke banks.

"It's a Parliament," said Harrod. "Now I wonder what they have got to talk about. If the truth were ever known, I daresay they know more about co-operation than we do!"

He laughed, and so did I.

"You see I've got co-operation on the brain, Miss Margaret," he said. "I've set my heart upon making your father see what an advantage it would be for the farmers."

"I thought that was one of his own favourite things," said I.

"I'm afraid that's not exactly the sort I mean," replied he. "He means co-operation between labourers or artisans to thwart their employers—or at least to get on without them. I mean co-operation between landowners to keep their goods up to the prices that will repay them for their outlay."

"Oh, I'm afraid that is a very different thing," murmured I. I felt in my bones that father would never take part in it.

"Yes, I know," he answered. "But I want to see the Squire about it. I hope to bring him round to my views. I am to meet him to-night." He looked at his watch. We had not noticed how the twilight was falling.

"Well, you hurry on and meet the Squire," said I, just a trifle nettled at the way he said it. "*I'm* going out in the boat with old Eben."

"That 'll make you very late," said Harrod.

"I mean to go," said I obstinately.

He looked at me and smiled—shaking his head a little reprovingly. The smile made me forget everything.

"Won't you put the Squire off a little to come out with me?" I begged wistfully. "It's so beautiful on the sea."

He hesitated a moment, and I ran down to the shore where old Eben was waiting for me. But before I had reached it I heard Harrod's firm, light step following me.

"Is this the right time to take up nets?" he asked of the fisherman.

"Women always thinks it's the right time to do a thing when they wants it," said Eben. "But I've knowed missie a little one," he added stolidly.

He was going to call his "mate" for the other boat, two being necessary to do what they called the "seining,"—that is to say, the drawing in of the net from opposite angles, —but Harrod stopped him.

"I'll go out in one boat with the young lady, if you'll take the other," he said.

My heart grew big. Eben asked him if

he knew anything about the work, very doubtful as to the competency of a mere pleasure-seeker, but suddenly his face lit up.

He looked from me to Harrod.

"It works all right, eh?" he asked of me.

I thought he had lost his wits, until suddenly it occurred to me that those were the words I had used when he had suggested that the new bailiff did not "work well" at the farm. What did he mean? I think I grew red as I jumped into the boat, and was glad that it was so dark that nobody could see me; for the twilight was dying fast and the stars were coming out faintly. It was cold on the water after the hot day; Harrod rowed, and once as before, he took a warm garment and wrapped it about my shoulders: this time it was his own coat.

We sat there a long hour throwing pebbles at the net to make the fish sink down in it, and rowing hither and thither to gather it in. Now that he was at it, Harrod was keen upon the sport. I think he was always keen upon all sport. But eager as I had been a while ago to see the fish brought in once more, I was not a bit eager now; though

the "take" was not a good one, I was not a bit disappointed.

The stars shone brighter every moment as the sky grew darker; they shone calmly. I looked up at the vault,—deep and blue, with the perfect blue of a summer's night, and studded over so thick and bright with their thousands of wonderfully piercing eyes. Half an hour ago I had thought I wanted no more than that quiet sympathy of friendship—but now, did I want no more? I scarcely knew myself.

But the stars shone calmly. They shone as we crossed the solitary marsh, and roused the timid night-jar upon the roadside. He uttered his weird and plaintive note like the speechless cry of some sorrowing soul, and fluttered away in short little flights along the pathway till he reached the dark wood under the cliff; and there he hid himself from our sight, still sending his mournful appeal at intervals through the darkness.

No wonder that the country folk hold the bird in horror, and still imagine that its presence in the neighbourhood of any dwelling is an omen of coming death or misfortune!

One could fit the cry with words if one would, so far is it from the senseless utterance of a senseless creature, so near to the pathetic appeal of a human soul.

But the stars shone, and not even mother's just upbraiding, nor a certain silent surprise on my sister's countenance, which troubled me far more, could take away from me the good hours which had been mine, could make the stars stop shining in the great fathomless blue.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A WEEK or more had passed by since the night when I had drawn the nets. It was the first of September, and my birthday. I was nineteen years old. A hot, fair day; all the cloudiness and rain of a fortnight since, forgotten in bright sunshine and in the scent of the roses that were making their second bloom.

I was hardly up in the morning before Joyce brought me a little gift which she had been busy preparing for me; it was a handkerchief that she had embroidered for me herself. It must have cost her all her leisure. I had often laughed at her, telling her that a piece of needlework was far more beautiful to her than all the lovely things that God had made in the world; but that day I wondered why it was that Joyce loved

to work a handkerchief for me when I had never cared to sit long enough in-doors to do such a thing for her in all my life. I turned and kissed her. I hoped she did not see that there was a tear in my eye. I turned away very quickly so that she should not do so; but I know that there was one

Father and mother gave me a black silk dress. It was a sign that I was now quite grown up, and I think I appreciated it more on that account than for its own particular value; certain ideas about "looking nice" were slowly beginning to develop in me, but they were not altogether associated with a black silk dress, although indeed this was a very good one, soft and rich, as much like mother's own old-fashioned one as could be obtained in those more modern days.

Deborah too had her little gift for me, although with a comment upon the absurdity of such things; and even Reuben found a word to say on the subject. Ah me, why was I not contented, as I had always been contented before with these tender signs of the quiet affection which had filled my life up till now? When father gave me one of his

rare kisses before the others came in to dinner, and bade me be a good girl and a happy one, I was ashamed to think that there was anything else in the world that I wanted besides his love and care.

We sat down rather silent to the meal. Even though it was my birthday, nobody was in good spirits. Father had ridden up to "The Elms" that morning, and I suppose he was tired: he was often tired with a very slight exertion nowadays. And the weather was hot. Mother declared that the weather was so hot that her marrow-bone was melted to a pulp. She never could abide the hot weather, and always had the strongest figures of speech ready to hand to express its effect upon her.

"I should think it'll kill off all the old folk in the village," said she.

"Oh no, mother," I laughed; "it's the frost kills off old folk. This will do them good. It ought to do little David Jarret good too."

Father shook his head sadly. "Mother, I want you to send the poor little lad some more broth," said he. "I've been round to

see him this morning. He won't be long for this world; and while he's in it I want him to have all that his own mother ought to get him, and don't."

Mother promised to take him the broth herself, and then she asked—what I had been dying to ask ever since father had come in—whether he knew when the bailiff was expected back from London, whither he had gone on farm business some three days ago.

"Dorcas expected him home to-day," said father, "but she didn't know what time."

"Well, I shall be right glad to see him," declared mother. "I don't believe he's been near the place this week past; and as for the Squire, why, I can't but think there must something have happened to him."

"Nonsense, Mary; what should the Squire want to come for, save now and then for friendship," said father. "He hasn't got work upon the place, and I'm sure we're not such good company all the year round as to tempt folk to come here to do nothing. We're working men and women, and have no time for talk."

Mother laughed. "Well, Laban, I have seen you get time to talk over some things," said she. "It's natural, I'm sure. And when it's the Rev. Mr Morland, that knows something about doing good, I'm pleased myself. Not but what you used to have many a nice chat with the Squire too, times ago, before you got so set upon other things."

This was all a hit at Frank, I knew, but father did not answer. He tapped his fingers impatiently on the table-cloth, waiting for his helping of pudding, and at that moment a dark figure passed across the lawn to the porch, and my heart went thump upon my side as mother declared gladly that it was Mr Trayton Harrod, and bade Joyce go bid him welcome.

"Now, Laban," said she, "you won't go and be tetchy with the man, will you? He has done you a world of good with the farm, and you might be beholden to him for it, instead of being so worriting as you have been of late."

Whether father was "tetchy" or not I never knew. It was my place to leave him

alone with his bailiff when they had to talk business, and moreover I did not want to meet him there amongst so many; I had a craving for just one quiet word.

I went and sat outside on the lawn, just under the big square window-seat of the dwelling-room. There was a seat there in the shade, and I took a book and waited. I heard the voices of the two men inside rising and falling in eager discussion; then mother's voice in gentle remonstrance, for she had not left the room when Joyce and I did, and a moment later I heard father pass out, still talking, and Harrod after him. Mother came to the window and opened it wide just above where I was sitting, and then went out also; the room was empty.

I fell to wondering how it was that men, who all seemed to me good and admirable, could differ so very materially: father, the Squire, Trayton Harrod—all good in their own way, and none agreeing; father's warmest welcome for a new-comer, who did not really give him what the others did.

Yes, I felt *that*, although I recognised Frank Forrester's fascination, and declared

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to myself that he had fascinated, and always would fascinate, my sister Joyce.

She came into the room above my head, just as I made this reflection. She was singing to herself. I wondered how it was that she could sing. If she really loved Frank, could she sing like that now that he was away, that she could never see him, never have any news of him? If she really loved Frank? Something that was like an iron hand seemed to grip my heart and turn me sick. Could I have sat there singing to myself when the man I loved was far away? No, I knew that I could not. Even now, I felt as though I should never sing again; never sing again as I had sung that bright May morning when I had raced along the dyke with Taff, before I had ever met Trayton Harrod. Yet he was here, within hail; the word that I wanted of him might be spoken any day. Even a week ago, on the sea, under the stars, had it not been near to being spoken?

I was not unhappy, but I could not have sung as Joyce was singing. I kept quite still under the window. I did not want her to

know I was there, I did not want to speak to her, I wanted to think.

Involuntarily there came to my mind that time on the cliff, the night before she went away to Sydenham, when I had told her that she was overrating her own strength—that she would never be able to live without Frank. I had not met Trayton Harrod then, but now I knew that what I had said was true: "When a girl loves a man, she wants him every minute of her life, and something goes wrong in her heart all the time that she is parted from him."

It would be true for me, but was it true for Joyce? Was it only that we were different?

I sat still, and Joyce went on singing. She was singing "Annie Laurie"—one of the songs that I used to please father and the Squire with, when the long winter evenings made time.

But suddenly she stopped. Some one had come into the room; it was Harrod. I knew it before he spoke. And he did not speak for a long while—for such a long while that I wondered.

"You're not looking well, Miss Maliphant," he said at last. "The heat tells on you."

"Oh, indeed," answered she in a low voice. "I'm quite well. I never have such a colour as Margaret has, you know."

"But I think you work too hard in the house. You don't get out-doors enough."

She laughed a little shy laugh.

"I like working," said she. "I'm not so fond of out-doors as Meg is."

He said no more, and presently I heard the rustle of brown paper. I had noticed when I met him in the hall that he had a small parcel in his hand.

"How did you like London?" asked Joyce. "It must have been very hot there."

"It was," replied he. "I didn't like it at all. I'm heartily glad to get back. But I found a minute to run up to Regent Street to look at those shops you told me of. I bought this. I want your opinion on it."

I wondered what it was. A smothered exclamation came from Joyce.

"You like it?" asked he in a pleased tone.

"Oh, yes; I think it's lovely," answered

she, "lovely!" I had never known Joyce so enthusiastic over anything.

"Well, Miss Maliphant, will you ——" he began, and then he stopped.

I raised myself a little on the seat lest I should miss the words. But no words came; and then suddenly it struck me that I was playing a mean part, listening here to what was not meant for my ears, and I rose, rustling the leaves of the shrubs as I went by. Even then there was no sign from those two within the room. What ailed the man? He was not wont to be so awkward. And I felt that Joyce was blushing; it made me furious. I moved on, meaning to go in, but the next words arrested me.

"At least," said Joyce, "I think it would be lovely for a lady to wear in town."

Then it was some article of dress.

"I see you don't really admire it," replied Harrod, in a disappointed voice. "I was afraid I shouldn't know how to choose such a thing properly. I'm sorry. I was thinking ——" he made a long pause, and then he added abruptly, almost savagely — "well, I was thinking of offer-

ing it to your sister. I hear it is her birthday."

A blush crept over my cheek, even out there where there was no one to see me. But I could not have told whether I was pleased or not.

"Oh, do, do please give it to her, then," cried my sister eagerly. "I'm sure she'll be pleased. I'm sure she would like to have it. Don't think of what I said."

She was quite distressed. Why was she so much distressed over it?

"I don't think it's really worth giving to any one," said he, with a laugh; and then he said something quite commonplace, I forget what, and I heard him throw down the parcel and go out of the room.

What did it mean? His behaviour was scarcely even polite. I waited a minute, wondering; I thought I heard a little sob through the window. I hastened in-doors and into the parlour. Yes, Joyce turned away hastily as I came in, and I could see that she dried her eyes furtively: she had been crying.

"Whatever is the matter, Joyce?" cried

I, I'm afraid crossly enough. She turned her face round to me smiling. I felt a throb of shame. Only that very morning tears of tenderness had come into my eyes, as I thought of the pleasure she had taken in sitting hours together to do fine embroidery for me when she might have been in the fields! But before I could say any more, and before she could answer, mother came in.

"Joyce," said she, "here's Mr Hoad with his daughters, and father wants us to make 'em welcome to tea. I'm sure we're not fit to make any one welcome to-day — the butter coming so bad, and all the ironing to do, and the best parlour not turned out this week past. But whatever father says is right, of course, so I suppose they must stay."

Joyce looked up with her patient, gentle eyes.

"Of course we will make them welcome," said she. "I'll set the drawing-room straight." And she and mother went out together to see to the washing of the best tea-cups, and the uncovering of the best furniture.

I had not said a word. Mother and Joyce

no doubt found it natural enough that I should not speak, for they both knew my aversion to the Hoad family. But at that moment I was not thinking of the Hoads. I was thinking of nothing but Joyce and Harrod, and the parcel which still lay on the table. Mother had not noticed it.

As soon as she and my sister were gone out, I darted towards it and opened it. Had he not said that it was meant for me?

It contained a delicate rose-coloured silk shawl, strewn with little white flowers, and finished with long fringes — a soft, quaint garment that reminded one of one's grandmothers even then, and was choice and dainty enough for the sprucest of them.

It was perfectly suited to Joyce, who always had something of the air of an old picture; but to me — commonplace, workaday me, with my red hair — how could he have thought of such a thing?

I held it in my hand a long time, looking at it and wondering. It was not that I was surprised that he should give me a present; to tell the truth, I had looked for a present from him, but I had thought it would be a

book—a book like one of those in his father's old library that I had so much envied. How was it that he had chosen a thing so unsuited to me, and so well suited to Joyce?

I was still standing there with the soft, pretty folds crushed up in my hand when the door opened suddenly and Trayton Harrod stood on the threshold. I had no time to put the shawl away; I remained there with it in my hand—awkwardly. And he did not say a word to help me out of the difficult position; he only looked at me in a morose sort of fashion. I was obliged to make the best of it.

"I beg your pardon," I stammered; "but Joyce said—that is to say——" I stopped, blushing furiously. I had meant to be quite frank, and to confess that I had overheard the conversation, but my courage failed in his sight.

He did not speak, and I felt very foolish. Why did he stand there, silent, with that frown upon his wide brow—that frown that never used to be there?

"It's a very beautiful shawl," I said timidly, "and it would look lovely, I am sure,

upon some grand lady who drives in her own carriage."

"Yes," said he, speaking at last; "things aren't pretty if they don't suit."

"Well, of course finery is *not* in our line; at least not in—in my line," I stammered.

I added the last words so low that I don't think he heard them. He almost snatched it out of my hand.

"No, thank heaven, it's not," he answered. "So we'll say no more about it."

But when he took it from me, there came over me a wild foolish longing to have the thing. What at another time I should have laughed at possessing, I wanted now more than all the books that I had envied—more than any other gift in the world. And it belonged to me. He meant it for me; it was mine, and I would not part with it.

"Oh, please, please, Mr Harrod," I cried, "don't misunderstand me. I am very much obliged to you for having thought of my birthday. I like it very much indeed. I—thank you with all my heart."

I stretched out my hand for it again, but

he only looked at me. I fancied there was a sort of surprise in his gaze.

"Of course, of course," he murmured at last, as if he were pulling himself together. "I'm afraid it will be of no use to you, Miss Margaret; as you say, it is not a suitable gift: but if you will take it, of course you are welcome."

I took it—but a chill fell upon my heart.

"You did not remember my commission when you were in London, Mr Harrod," I asked, with, I am afraid, something of bitterness in my voice.

"No," he answered quickly. "Did you give me a commission? I'm very sorry if I forgot any wish of yours."

"A commission to buy me some of those books that you have in your library," I said.

I saw him bite his lip as though vexed. Perhaps he *was* vexed to think that he had forgotten something which might have given me pleasure. But if he was, he was too proud to confess it.

"Oh, that was no commission," he said, with a little cold laugh. "You know I would not take it. I told you I was not the person

for such a job. I advised you to ask Squire Broderick."

I tossed my head. "Yes; and I think I answered you that the Squire was no such friend of mine that I should ask favours of him," I replied hotly. My temper was rising, but luckily he had more self-control than I had; he saved me from making an exhibition of myself.

"I ought not to have forgotten any request of yours," said he. "I'm sorry. If you'll give me the names of the books you want, I'll write to-night."

I thanked him, but I said I did not know the names of the books, which indeed was true enough, and we turned the talk round to everyday things, until luckily some one came into the room.

But there was some one else who knew the names of books, and who, moreover, remembered that I cared about them. It was Squire Broderick. He came in that evening with a case of twelve little volumes of Shakespeare's complete works under his arm.

"I know you're very keen about reading, Miss Margaret," said he, with his sunny

smile. "I've often thought of you trying to puzzle out Milton's 'Paradise Lost' up there on the old window-seat at 'The Elms.' But I think you'll find this easier reading than 'Paradise Lost,' and more amusing."

I blushed a fire-red, for they were all standing by,—father, mother, and Joyce, and Trayton Harrod. I almost fancied that I saw a suspicion of a smile break round his mouth as the offering was made.

I am afraid that I scarcely even thanked the Squire audibly for it. I can only hope that that fiery blush appealed to him somehow as a recognition of his kindness to me, and not as—what it really was. Good Mr Broderick! How far too good to me always! Even to this day it hurts me to think that perhaps I hurt him.

But something in the way father shook him by the hand, and something in his voice as he said, "Oh, Meg, it isn't every girl has such a kind and thoughtful friend," made up a little, I hope, for my curtness, although indeed the Squire went away as soon as he had given his gift, and with something in his face that was not quite like his usual cheeriness.

I am afraid that neither father's warmth of manner nor mother's thanks, hearty as they were, were enough for him. Could he have been wishing that it had been Joyce's birthday, that the gift might have been made to her? For no one had been so enthusiastic as Joyce over my good fortune.

"The very thing for you, dear," she had said after the Squire was gone, taking up the books and looking at them admiringly. "Isn't it, Mr Harrod?"

Harrod agreed warmly that there was no doubt about their being the very thing for me, and every one declared that I was a very lucky girl. But no one knew anything about that pale pink shawl, with the white flowers, that had fallen into my hands in so strange a manner. I don't know why, but I kept that gift a secret from every one. And to this day it lies in the same folds, in the same piece of grey-blue paper in which it was originally given me.

Did I think myself a very lucky girl?

CHAPTER XXXII.

Frank Forrester did not come down to Marshlands for the elections. He did not come, but he was very near coming.

I met Mary Thorne and the Hoad girls out canvassing two days before. Mary would have passed me with a nod, but Jessie Hoad had something to say.

"I don't think it's at all nice of your father not to let you help us canvass for Mr Thorne, Margaret Maliphant," said she tartly. "Father says he can't make it out at all. He always understood that Mr Maliphant would support the Radical cause, and now that for the first time they have got a candidate who has some chance of getting in, he won't have anything to do with him."

"I suppose my father knows what he is about," answered I proudly.

"Does he?" retorted she. "It's more than any one else knows then."

I bit my tongue in my efforts to keep it from saying something rude, yet I am afraid the tone was not quite conciliatory in which I retaliated—"His friends seem to know well enough to trust him! You've only got to ask the people round about to hear whose advice they would soonest follow on the country side."

It was true, but I should not have said it.

Jessie turned to Mary Thorne. "We ought to have her with us," said she. "The funny thing is, she's right enough. The labourers hereabouts do look to Farmer Maliphant in the most extraordinary way. He don't hold any meetings, or work at the thing like other folk work. But there's the fact, and that's why it's so aggravating of the man to hold aloof. What does he do it for, eh, my dear?" asked she, looking at me again.

"I don't know," I repeated sullenly; "I'm not clever enough to understand father's motives. I only know that he says that Parliament's no good."

Jessie was going to retaliate, but the other stopped her.

"Come, don't bother any more about it, Jessie," said she, with the frank, good-natured smile that had always drawn me towards her, in spite of my father. "We're not going to get Farmer Maliphant's vote nor his support either, and what's the good of going on at it?"

"Oh, my dear, going on at it is the only way to get anything, and one doesn't like to be beaten without knowing the reason why. However, we shall have some one down to-night who will make a finer speech at the meeting than ever Farmer Maliphant would have made, even if he had consented to give us a glimpse of these grand deep notions of his."

Mary Thorne laughed in a sort of self-conscious way; I wondered why.

"Who is coming to speak at the meeting?" I asked.

"Why, Squire Broderick's nephew, Captain Forrester, to be sure," laughed Miss Hoad. "He'll make an effect on the people, I'll be bound. So fascinating and so handsome.

I've never heard him speak, but father says he's awfully enthusiastic, and all that kind of thing."

I felt myself grow red or pale, I don't know which. I had wanted him to come, but I had not thought it would be in that way. Yet it was what I should have known must happen if Frank came down to the elections at all.

"I'm sure he will make a splendid speech," said Mary Thorne, with a sort of pride. "I told father it would be everything if we could get him to come down."

"He has been a long while making up his mind," said Jessie.

"Well, it is awkward for him, you see," said the other. "He naturally doesn't care to go against his uncle."

"It's worse to go against one's principles," declared Jessie loftily.

"I quite understand it," declared Mary loyally. "He mightn't mind it if the Squire weren't such a dear old fellow, but it is awkward, and I consider it a great mark of friendship that he should do it for us."

"Is he going to stay at the Manor or at the Priory," I put in bluntly.

"Oh, at the Priory with us, of course," replied she. "And I must send the carriage for him in an hour. So, please, we must get on, Jessie, or I shall never be home in time."

She held out her hand to me, and of course I took it, as I took also Jessie Hoad's when she offered it, but I was not comfortable.

Why was Frank always going to stay at the Priory now, and why was he willing to risk hurting his uncle's feelings solely for the sake of doing an act of friendship to the Thornes? I could not understand it, any more than I could understand why Mr Hoad should be so extravagantly anxious that Thorne should succeed. Miss Jessie was not in the habit of troubling herself about things that, as she would have expressed it, "didn't pay"; yet here she was putting herself to all manner of inconvenience to go canvassing with Mary Thorne, while Mr Hoad was scouring the county for votes and spending his evenings writing flaming articles for

country papers, or making emphatic speeches at country meetings.

I might have thought about it more than I did if I had not had the more interesting matter of Frank's arrival to occupy me. Would father let us go to the meeting that we might hear Frank speak? Would mother let Joyce have a word with him? How were they to meet, and, most important of all, how would Joyce behave towards him? I flew home to tell her, but she was not in the house. Deb did not know where she was.

Deb only gave vent to a loud fit of laughter when I told her that Captain Forrester was coming down to speak at the meeting, and that I wanted to give my sister the news. She made me angry—it was no good speaking to Deb. I caught up my hat again, and rushed off, seized with a sudden inspiration to take a walk that evening and find myself at the station at the time that Frank Forrester would arrive. In common civility he could not do less than offer me a lift up in the carriage which would have been sent to meet him,

and anyhow, I could not fail to get a few words with him.

Yes, I would talk to him of Joyce. I would tell him that her manner was deceptive,—I would tell him how reserved we all were, how different to himself, how rarely we showed what we really felt; I would tell him that her cold manner the day when I had taken him to the Grange was but from her desire to be loyal to the promise she had sworn our parents,—that in truth she loved him; I would tell him how changed she was, for indeed it was true. I would try and not be shy,—I would try and give him fresh heart.

I sped away over the downs and along the hill, Taff following me uninvited. It was a long way to the station, and I was afraid of missing the train. Ah, I had missed it! Just as I was crossing the last strip of level road before reaching the rails, I saw the Priory carriage bowling towards me on its return journey. What a pity! said I to myself! But it came near and nearer, and at every bit that shortened the distance between us, I became more and more sure that Frank

was not in it; there was only one person, and that person was Mary Thorne.

She stopped the carriage as she saw me. Her face was very pale, and I saw that she held the yellow envelope of a telegram in her hand.

"Oh, Miss Maliphant, do you think it would really be quite impossible to persuade your father to address the meeting for us to-night?" she said hurriedly. "We are disappointed of Captain Forrester, who was to have spoken." Her lip trembled a little.

"I hope he's not ill?" I said.

She did not answer at once.

"I hope nothing has happened to him?" I repeated.

I saw her fingers close tightly over the yellow envelope, until they were quite white.

"Yes," she said slowly. "He was riding in a steeplechase not far from here; he has been thrown. They say——" her lip trembled again. She could not go on.

"But he's not much hurt—not badly hurt?" I cried, in a fury of anxiety. "Do speak."

She looked at me sadly, but a little surprised, and no wonder. I did not know how

loud or how eagerly I had spoken till I saw the coachman look round.

"Father is so fond of him," I said. "I should be so sorry if he were hurt."

"They say, only slightly injured; no cause for alarm," she answered. "But—one never knows."

She turned away her head. I knew very well that she was crying. I ought to have been sorry; I was only angry.

"Oh, I daresay it's a mere excuse," I said ill-naturedly. "Men are so clever at excuses. He has got scratched just enough to say so. He didn't want to come."

She turned round. Her eyes were dry again. But she must indeed have been a good-natured girl, for there was no trace of anger in her face.

"You don't know him, that's not his way," she said quietly. And then she added: "You'll try and persuade your father, won't you?"

"I'll give him your message," I answered. "But I know perfectly well he won't speak."

"Well, then, we must do the best we can without him," she said. "It's too late to get

any one else. I must get home quickly. Good-night."

She drove on and left me standing in the road. Another time I might have thought it rude of her; but then I noticed nothing, I thought of nothing, just as she probably thought of nothing,—but that Frank Forrester was hurt. And for my own part, I thought of nothing so much as that Joyce would—*must be*—heart-broken.

Taff seeing me standing there as though turned to stone, leapt upon me barking. I took no notice of him, but he roused me, and I tore up the hill as fast as I could to carry my gruesome message. Instinctively I felt that this at last must rouse my sister to show her true feelings, and—if there were a mask on her face—that this at last must strip it off.

I did not want to see Deborah, and I did not stop to go in by the front door. I climbed the hedge, and crossed the lawn to the parlour window. Through the tangle of traveller's-joy and frail old-fashioned jasmine that framed it around, I looked into the room. Father and Trayton Harrod sat by

the fireless hearth, smoking their pipes, and at the table was Joyce, with the inevitable basket of family darning: her profile was turned towards me, listening intently, with eyelids raised and needle poised idle in her hand, to something the bailiff was saying.

What was there in anything there to vex and sour and wound me? Yet I went in hastily, letting the door slam behind me.

"Good gracious me! Fancy sitting in-doors this lovely fine evening!" said I. "We shan't have so many more of them that we need waste one. The summer is nearly over."

"Why, what's the matter, Meg?" asked father. "Let folk please themselves, child."

"Oh dear, yes; they can please themselves," I answered.

"Is that all you came in-doors to say?" laughed he again.

Harrod was busy filling his pipe, ramming in the tobacco with a stern hand, while Joyce bent forward again over her work.

"No," answered I promptly. "I came with a message for you, father, from Miss Thorne. She wants you to oblige her by

speaking at the Radical meeting to-night."

A cloud gathered on father's brow. "Speak at the Radical meeting!" echoed he. "What ails the girl to make such a request, or you, Meg, to bring it? You know very well I shall speak at no meeting."

"I told her so," said I curtly. "But she wouldn't take my word."

"This is some of Hoad's work," he said excitedly. "Why can't the man understand that he won't bully me into doing what I don't intend to do? I don't intend to support James Thorne. I don't consider James Thorne an honest man. Why can't he leave off worrying?"

This speech was not at all like father. There was an amount of irritability, almost of pettiness in it, which was quite foreign to him, and his saying that Hoad couldn't "bully" him into anything struck me as odd even then, though the more weighty matter that was in my mind made me chiefly impatient to hear my own voice.

"Well, it isn't Mr Hoad this time, father," said I hastily. "I'm sure he knew nothing

about it. Captain Forrester was to have spoken."

Joyce did not raise her head, but I saw a little frown trouble her smooth brow.

"Forrester," echoed father. "No, no! You're mistaken, child. I should be disappointed, grievously disappointed," he added, tapping the fingers of one hand on the knuckles of the other, "to think he should be led astray to throw himself in with that lot. Are you quite sure of it, Meg?"

"I am quite sure he *was* going to speak," said I. "But——"

"Ah, I'm sorry, I'm very sorry," repeated father. "But he's young — easily misled. I must have a talk with him. I didn't know the lad was in these parts."

"He's not," said I. "He was to have come, but he has had an accident,—he has been thrown from his horse in a steeplechase."

"God bless my soul!" cried father, starting up from his chair. "Why didn't you say so? Not killed?"

My eyes were on Joyce's face. She had

looked up anxiously, but she had not changed colour one bit.

"No, not killed," answered I slowly. "But I don't know how badly hurt. The telegram didn't say."

"Poor lad, poor lad," murmured father concernedly, as he sat down again. But still Joyce did not speak. She looked serious and distressed, and a faint pink flush had deepened on her cheek, but there was no horror in her eyes.

"Men shouldn't ride in steeplechases," said Harrod. "It's the most dangerous of all riding—and only for amusement after all."

"I should have thought Captain Forrester was such a splendid rider that he could have managed any horse," said Joyce.

"Oh, it's not always a matter of mere management in a steeplechase," said Harrod. And I do believe my sister was actually opening her mouth to reply to him, when I said sharply: "Joyce, mother wants you," and by that means got her out of the room.

"Poor lad," I heard the old voice murmur again as I closed the door.

"Father's sorry," said I, as I turned round and faced my sister.

"Yes," said she; "of course. Who could help being sorry?"

"Some folk seem to be able to help it very well," laughed I. "*I* couldn't have sat there discussing with another man how my lover had nearly come by his death! At least I can scarcely fancy that I could. Of course I'm not engaged to be married to anybody, so perhaps I don't know how I should feel."

Joyce looked at me aghast. "Good gracious, Meg," said she in a half frightened whisper, "what is the matter?"

I suppose my face had told her something of what I was feeling; I suppose it had become white, and the grey eyes were black in it, as father used to declare they were wont to become when I was angry.

"The matter?" cried I. "Oh, there's nothing the matter. Only I was a little surprised to see how coolly you took the news of Frank's accident."

"Why, what was I to say?" said she. "I am very sorry, and I sincerely trust that it is nothing serious."

"Well," answered I scornfully, "I should think you would feel as much as that if Joe Millet had been run away with by the old dray-horse, or even if Luck were to have a fit. I'm sure I should. I was afraid you would be very unhappy when I brought you that bad piece of news. I was afraid you would be quite upset. I didn't know whether I ought to tell you before a stranger, but I needn't have troubled myself. You took it very well. Perhaps poor Frank would have been a little hurt to see how well you took it."

"I don't know what right you have to speak to me like that, Meg," said my sister in a low voice. "How do you know what I feel? People aren't all alike. You take things very hard. You must have everything your own way, or else you fight and struggle. But I'm not like that. I believe that whatever happens is all for the best; why can't you let me take things my own way?"

"Good gracious me!" cried I, "take them your own way by all means; only you might argue till you're black in the face, but you'll never get me to believe that it's all for the

best whether the man one cares for breaks his neck or not."

"Oh, Meg, you know I didn't mean that," murmured Joyce, in a low, disheartened voice. The tears gathered over those clear blue eyes of hers that were as untroubled waters, whose transparent depths could be fathomed at a glance. There was never anything mysterious about my sister's eyes; they were simple as a little child's, but, unlike a child's, they had ceased to wonder.

The tears irritated me, but they made me ashamed of my unreasonable temper, and I said quickly, with sudden change of mood: "Well, I'm a cross-patch of course. But you know it was enough to make anybody angry to see you sitting there so meek and patient when I knew you must be dying of anxiety. And all for nothing but to please two dear old people who have forgotten what it was to be young and eager. But you must write to Frank at once."

"He knows very well how sorry I am," said Joyce.

I think my face must have darkened again, for she added almost humbly: "You know

I never could write letters, and I had rather not vex mother."

"Then you'd rather let that poor fellow think you didn't care whether he was dead or alive, than show mother you've got a mind and ten fingers of your own?" I cried.

"He must think what he likes," said Joyce, in her most quietly obstinate voice; "I don't want to write." And that was all I could get from her.

"Very well, *I'll* write then," I said, with ill-concealed anger. "I like writing letters, and I am not afraid of mother."

I flew up-stairs, I did not dare trust myself to say another word, but on the first landing I looked down and saw her head upturned towards me. There was a pitiful look in the blue eyes.

"Don't think me heartless, Meg," she murmured.

"Oh no, I understand," said I wearily. "I daresay you're quite right. I daresay it's much better not to take things too hard."

After all she might be right. She had said, "How can you know what I feel?" And indeed how could I possibly know? How

could one ever know what anybody else felt? I repeated once more as if to convince myself of it—and I am afraid, I am sadly afraid, that my own voice broke a little—"I know I'm not always happy, and perhaps it's because I take things too hard."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Girls such as we were got little time for sentimental brooding, however, and though up-stairs in the little attic where Joyce and I had always slept, I threw myself on the bed and looked sadly out across the marsh with eyes that saw none of its plaintive placidity, mother soon waked me from day-dreams and called me down-stairs to active employment that did its best to drive love and its torments from my mind.

The Squire was ill—he had taken a bad cold out partridge-shooting—and mother was making him some of her special orange jelly as a salve for his cough.

Those who were interested in the Conservative success at the elections were much concerned at the Squire's illness just at this time, and Mr Hoad, who had, it seems, been

round that afternoon, had been heard to declare that it was all to "our" good that the Squire should not have been able to hold forth at the rival meeting that evening.

But mother did not regard the matter in that light, and I believe she told Mr Hoad so. I was not present; it had happened at the time I had been gone to the station, but according to Joyce she had told him so very plainly. Mother, as I have often said, was as loyal to Squire as if he had been her own son, and on this occasion so—I believe—was father also. Looking back to that time, I seem to remember the sort of rough stand-aloofness which had characterised father's attitude towards the Squire, giving place of late to a curious sort of half unwilling consideration and tenderness.

When mother called me from my bedroom to the kitchen, she was full of the Squire's illness. "I hope it's nothing serious," she kept saying, "and that he won't go worrying himself anyway about this accident to his nephew."

"Oh, you have heard about it, have you?" answered I. "Well, I don't see why the

Squire can't afford to worry a little about it, I'm sure. And I'm certain he does—anybody with any heart in them would." I said it bitterly, but I did not anger mother.

"Well, there, Margaret," she said, abruptly, "you know I never did like the young man, and I can't pretend to break my heart over this. I'm sorry he's come to harm, of course, but I can't help feeling glad Joyce takes it as she does. We can't expect her to forget all at once, but please God she *will* forget, and things perhaps be even as I hoped for."

"I can't think how you can suppose it would please God your daughter should be a fickle, shallow-hearted creature, I'm sure," said I hotly.

"You and I never were of one mind over that matter, were we?" smiled mother, quite good-temperedly. "But the day 'll come when perhaps you'll say I was right. You're but a child yet—you know nothing about such things saving what you've got out of books, and that aint much like it. Perhaps you may come to know what it is yourself one day, and then you'll tell the dif-

ference between the real stuff and the make-believe."

A child! Was my waywardness, my impetuosity, my passionate longing, only childishness? Now that I am a woman, I wonder whether mother was partly right in her simple intuition? Only partly: I did know something about "such things."

"I don't believe Joyce hasn't taken it to heart," said I doggedly.

"Well, her eyes aren't so heavy as yours by a long way," answered mother. "I don't know what's come to *you* of late. You used not to be mopy. Nobody could say it of you, whatever else they might say. You had your tantrums, and you always have been a dreadful one for wearing out your clothes, but mopy you were not. But I'm sure you fret more over this business than Joyce herself does. I've no patience with you. As for any work you do for me, I'd as soon have your room as your company. I like to see a body put her heart into whatever comes to hand, if it's only boiling a potato. You take my word for it, my girl, it's the only way to be happy."

The tears came into my eyes, for I knew very well that mother was right. I turned away that she should not see them, for I was ashamed of tears, but she did see them nevertheless.

"There, there," she added kindly, "I don't want to rate you. Be a good girl, and look more like yourself again. Half-hearted ways won't bring anybody on; and as for your complexion, well, you used to have a skin that I could boast of. Red hair she may have, I used to say, but look at her skin! And now it's no better than curds and whey. Come, get the muslin and strain off that jelly."

I did as I was bid, but I'm afraid not with my whole heart. Had it come to that, that anybody could say of me, Margaret Maliphant, that I had taken to moping after anybody?

"You shall take it up to the Manor yourself and leave it with the housekeeper, as soon as it's set, in the morning," said mother, tasting the liquid to see that it had just enough flavouring in it. "You can say it's from an old friend, and then it won't hurt her feelings."

We finished the job and set it down to cool before we went in to tea. Joyce was there with her hair smoothed and her face fresh, and I had red cheeks from stooping over the fire, and red eyes from something else that I would not remember. But I forced myself to look Harrod boldly in the face, asking what had become of father, and learning that they had been up to "The Elms" together, and that the walk had been too much for him.

"Mr Maliphant will take things so hard," added the bailiff, and the words sounded sadly familiar to me.

Father came in presently and handed me a letter addressed to Frank.

"Take that up to the Manor now, Meg," said he, "and get the address, and ask for news."

"Margaret is going up in the morning with some jelly for the Squire; I suppose that 'll do," said mother. "I don't expect it's near so bad as it was made out. Those things are always worse in the telling, and these young beaux are just the ones to get a sorry tale abroad about themselves."

"Hush, hush, mother; that's not like your kind heart," said father reproachfully; and mother laughed, and said she had meant no harm to him, and Joyce looked down on her plate uncomfortably.

But I heard nothing, and as soon as I had swallowed my meal I got up and went out. I recollect with what relief I welcomed Reuben on the terrace with his old dog, and began to talk of commonplace simple things. Feeling hurt me too much, and Reuben did not foster feeling.

"Dear old Luck," said I, stooping down to pat the dog, who looked up at me with tender eyes out of his dusky black-and-white face, and would have wagged his tail if there had been a long enough piece of it to wag. "I hope there has been no more talk of shooting you. We couldn't spare the sight of you about the farm."

"Nay," said Reuben, shaking his head; "when the dog goes, Reuben 'll go too. No mistake about that. He's been my luck, and when they take him they take me."

"Ah, well, you aren't either of you going

yet awhile," said I consolingly. "There's lots of life in you both."

"Ay, miss, aye," grinned the old man, well pleased. "We sent the sheep home last night, Luck and I—didn't we, old boy? Beale he have taken his sweetheart on a spree somewhere out Eastbourne way, and he asked me to see to the folding. I'm spry in the summer-time, and I was pleased enough. But I wouldn't have none o' them ondependable, skittish young 'uns. Not I."

"Who do you mean?" I asked.

"Nay, I place no dependence on young things," repeated he doggedly. "They're sure to have their eye on a bit of fun somewheres, and they be allays for trying new dodges. Now Luck he's safe and he's sure. He's got 'sperience, Luck has. He knows."

He nodded his head to and fro with an air of profound wisdom, and I burst out laughing.

It did me good. I had not laughed that day.

"What,—you mean the young sheep-dog, I suppose?" I said.

"Ay, miss," answered Reuben. "A 'andsome young chap enough, but ondependable." He paused, waiting for me to speak, but I saw whither he was drifting, and was silent. "There's others besides dogs as is ondependable!" he added slowly. "Such as we dursen't understand the ways o' them that are learned. Nay, would we presume! But there's others as is ondependable. Poor master! But the Lord knows what is best for us all."

"Well, He is sending us glorious weather for the crops, anyway," said I, with determined cheerfulness. "It's quite too hot for me."

"Ay, so be it for the 'ops, miss," grinned the old man.

"I don't believe it," cried I.

He took me by the arm and led me forward to the edge of the cliff, whence we could see the marsh in its whole wide expanse. The day, as I have said, had been very hot, but the sun had set now—it was full seven o'clock, and the long twilight had begun her peaceful reign, exquisite in sober tints and fragrant coolness of silent air.

The plain was slowly sinking into mystery; but silver-grey upon the bosom of the dykes, clearly defining their long, straight lines wherever they crossed the marsh, ribands of white mist unrolled themselves in the dim light.

"They're thicker than that back yonder," said he, "where the 'op gardens be."

"Well, what harm do the mists do?" laughed I. "The hops haven't got the rheumatics."

"Nay, miss, but the mists, this 'ot weather, and the scalding sun a-top, 'll spoil 'em worse nor they'll 'arm my old bones. They'll be as brown as brushwood."

Reuben delivered this speech in a low tragic whisper, and with the most ominous of expressions, holding my arm the while.

"Oh, Reuben, you always were a gloomy creature," said I. "I believe you like making the worst of things."

"Nay, it's the Lord's doing," said Reuben, piously; but if he had a-planted Early Perlifics they would ha' been all safe and garnered by now."

"Well, it isn't you that 'll be afflicted if the

hops fail, Reuben," said I tartly, "so you needn't be so pious and resigned over it;" and with that I walked off back into the house.

What Reuben had said had set me thinking. I wondered whether it was neither altogether distress at Frank's accident, nor fatigue from the walk, that had made father depressed at tea-time. He was not in the dwelling-room, neither was mother. There were papers strewn over the table, and an inkstand, with pen aslant across it, stood in the midst. The papers were evidently accounts, and somebody had been working at them.

I supposed it might be Trayton Harrod, for he was still there, contrary to his wont; but he was not seated at the table. He was standing up before the big, empty fireplace, and in one of the deep spindle-railed chairs at the side sat my sister Joyce. I fancied that he moved a little as I came in, but I was not sure.

"Where's father?" asked I sharply.

I looked at Joyce, but she did not reply.

"Your father is in the study, I believe," said Harrod. "He was here doing some work

with me, and did not feel so very well. I believe your mother is with him."

"Oh, I suppose the news of Captain Forrester's accident upset him," said I. "He is so very fond of him."

There was silence. The fact of Joyce not speaking somehow exasperated me.

"Do you think that was the reason, Joyce?" asked I.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she answered.

And when she spoke I saw why it was she had not spoken before: she had been crying.

"Dear me," said I, half frightened. "Is he so bad as that?"

Again she did not answer; it was Harrod who replied for her. "No, no, Miss Margaret," he said, "I assure you it's nothing of consequence."

Which did he mean?—father's illness, or Joyce's distress?

"I must go and see," said I. But I did not move. I was anxious about father, and yet I had not the courage to go and leave those two together. I stood looking at them. Joyce sat just where she had sat that cold spring evening not six months ago, when

she had told me that Frank Forrester had asked her to marry him. She even sat forward and clasped her hands over her knees, as she had clasped them then; only there was no bright fire now in the hearth to illumine her golden hair; the hearth was empty, but there was a curious sense of gold in the twilight.

In the flash of a moment the scene came back to me,—the strangeness of it; the absence of the glow of romance that I had dreamed of when I had first dreamed of romance for my beautiful sister. I had not guessed then that it was the lack of that golden glow that had chilled me. I had wanted it so: I had felt that, outwardly, everything was fitting for it to be so, and I had chosen to believe that it was so. But now I knew very well that it had never been so.

The fire was dead to-night, but the sense of the glow was there,—too, too brightly.

"I must go and see about father," I repeated, in a kind of dull voice. I wondered to hear the sound of it myself.

"Don't *you* go, Meg," said Joyce. "I

haven't washed up the tea-things yet, and Deb is busy. I must make haste. I'll look in as I go past."

Her voice had recovered its serenity, and she spoke brightly and sweetly. "Very well, I'll come too, in a minute, and help you," answered I, going through the hollow pretence of looking for something that I didn't want.

She got up and glided across the room, and out of the door, with that soft way she had. Harrod had sat down again to the table and the papers.

"What's the matter with Joyce?" I asked bluntly, almost before the door had closed.

He looked at me with those honest eyes of his. I could see that he scorned to make any pretence, any evasive answer.

"I have been speaking to her of something that distressed her," he said. "I should not have done it. I am sorry. I did not think it would have distressed her."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what it was. I don't know whether it was natural good feeling and politeness that prevented me, or whether I simply dreaded the answer. I

tried to think that the "something" related to Frank Forrester's accident, but I did not ask. "I did not think it would have distressed her" might point to that explanation, as of course Harrod knew nothing of any relations between her and the Captain. It might, but there was an undefined fear within me that it did not.

Harrod dropped his eyes again on the papers on the table, and took up the pen. An insane, wicked desire came upon me to hurt him for innocently hurting me.

"Mr Harrod," said I roughly, "Reuben has been talking to me outside. He thinks the hops are looking very badly."

He laid down the pen, and looked up, with an under lip that quivered a little.

"Reuben's opinion is not so infallible as I fancy you suppose, Miss Margaret," said he, trying to smile. "Your father has been round the property, and is, I fancy, quite as well able to judge of it as Reuben Ruck."

"Oh, did father think the hops looked well, then?" asked I.

I thought Harrod winced.

"Hops are a very difficult growth," he answered. "I don't suppose a perfect crop is gathered more than once in twenty years. A hundred chances are against it: your father knew this well enough when he went in for the speculation. He is a reasonable man."

I knew that this was intended as a reproof to me, and I knew that I deserved it. I had prided myself on being wise and calm over the business affairs of the farm, as I should have been if I had been father's son instead of his daughter. I had prided myself that Harrod considered me so, by talking things over with me as he often had done. But of late I had not been reasonable. I knew it. I knew that I was straining the very cord that I most counted upon, perhaps even to breaking point. I could have bitten my tongue out, and yet my wounded feelings got the better of me and carried my tongue away. I stood there ashamed, sick at heart. I wanted to make it up, I wanted to be forgiven, but I did not know what to say.

And while I was thinking what to say, the door opened, and father and mother came in.

Father's face was pale, and he walked uncertainly.

"There, there, that'll do, Mary," he said testily. "I'm all right now. The weather is a bit oppressive, that's all. I want to finish this bit of business with Harrod, if you'll leave us quiet."

Mother knew better than to say a word. Father sat down in the chair which Harrod got up to give him, and mother and I went out of the room.

My chance of reconciliation that evening was over.

I had to listen to mother's very natural distress about father's fresh indisposition, and her expressions of annoyance at its having been brought on, as she supposed, by the piece of news about "that young good-for-nothing." Then I had the tea-things to wash up with Joyce, and the clean linen to put away. And when all our work was done Trayton Harrod had gone, and I went up into the little attic whence mother had called me in the early evening, and sat down again in the dark to have it out with myself about all the puzzling events of this puzzling day.

Joyce had not yet come up to bed; I was all alone. The twilight was dead; the stars shone above — thousands of stars looking down upon me with a story of courage and hope in their bright eyes,—I wonder whether I understood it!

Deborah came in with a candle. She had forgotten to give us one. I was sorry she brought it.

"Lord bless my soul, Margaret! you startled me," said she. "Whatever are you doing? Why don't you get to bed?"

"Joyce hasn't come up yet," I said.

She put down the candle, and came up to me and took hold of me by the shoulders.

"You've been frettin'," said she sharply, looking down into my eyes. "Now whatever is that for?"

"How dare you say such a thing," answered I, pulling myself away. "I've not been fretting. I've nothing to fret about."

"Well, I don't know as you have," answered she. "But you've been fretting for all that. I've seen it for weeks past. What's it for?"

She stood there above me with her arms

akimbo, and her keen, round, dark eyes fixed upon me. It never occurred to her that I was not going to tell her what it was for.

"You've been frettin'," repeated she. "And what call you have to fret because Joyce's beau goes and falls off his horse, is more than I can understand."

"I tell you I'm not fretting," repeated I emphatically. "Of course what should it matter to me? I was surprised that Joyce took it so coolly. Some folk are so quiet. I suppose they feel just the same, but I'm sure you'd never know it. It's a mercy for them. They don't make so much noise."

"Oh, that's where it is!" said Deb sagely, as if she had guessed a secret. "You're so set on Joyce frettin' over that young spark. But, Lor' bless my soul, Joyce don't care for him. She never have cared for him, so as to say, properly. She was took at first by his being such a fine fellow and seemin' so fond of her. 'Twas natural enough. And you was so set on it you made her believe she liked him better nor she did. But that aint what's going to wash. She never loved the fellow."

"It's not true," cried I, with flaming eyes. "She did love him always, and she loves him just as much now."

Deb was not a bit put out by my impetuous sally. She only shook her head quietly and repeated: "No, she don't. And a precious good thing, too, seeing he's so like to forget her and mate with his own class."

"You're talking nonsense, Deb," cried I hotly. "Mate with his own class, indeed! We're as good as he, any day!"

"That may be," answered Deb calmly; "but he don't think so. He were keen upon her pretty face at first, but he's cooled down now and sees it wouldn't be a wise thing for him to do. It's a precious good thing Joyce don't care for him."

"I tell you Joyce does care for him," reiterated I savagely.

"Now I wonder whatever makes you so set upon Joyce being in love with that young man," said the old woman, looking at me sharply, and without paying the slightest attention to my passionate vindication of my sister's constancy.

"Oh, I know,—you want her to marry the

Squire and be a lady, as mother does," retorted I. "But you needn't bother. The Squire 'll never propose to her!"

"No, you're right there," laughed Deb, with a loud laugh that both puzzled and irritated me. "He won't. I don't rightly see as he could propose to any one in this house till folk are minded to give him a civil word now and then. But that ain't no reason why you should want your sister to wed where she don't love. Nay, Margaret, there's somethin' under that as we don't know of. What is it, eh?"

I looked at Deb defiantly; but her round, black eyes were full of a rough and simple sympathy. I knew Deb well enough to recognise the signs of it, and my sore, struggling pride gave way. I forgot all about having insisted a minute ago that I had nothing to fret about, and that I was not fretting. Just as I had used to do when I was a child and mother had whipped me for messing my frock, I put my head upon her broad bosom and began to cry.

Deb offered me no caress; she didn't know how, and she knew well enough I should be

ashamed of my unusual behaviour later; but after a few minutes she said grimly, "I thought as much. Bother the men!"

I dried my eyes at that, and between a laugh and a sob I said: "Why should you say that? What have they to do with it?"

"What have they to do with it?" cried Deb. "Why, everything. They always have. Folk may say it was the woman made Adam to sin, but she's been punished for it ever since if she did, and it's just about time it should stop. Men are at the bottom of every trouble that comes our way, though we ought to be ashamed to say so. If it's not loving of 'em, it's hating of 'em, and that's just as bad. What I want to see is a man a-worritting *his* life out for one of us. They take it so easy, they do. But there, dearie me," smiled the old woman, "I weren't always so wise; and you mark my words, if folks go fixin' their hearts on what's not meant for them, they can't expect to be easy nor comfortable no ways. Ah, I'm not talking stuff, I can tell you. Old Deb isn't such a fool as she looks. You wouldn't think I'd ever had a lover, would you, my dear? But I had, once upon a

time. I was a smart, bright lass, though I never was pretty, and the lads they were all fond of me. There was one of 'em fond of me for many a long year, just as patient as could be. He was better to do than I was, and would ha' been a good match for the likes o' me. But, Lor', I must needs go snubbin' of 'im, nasty uppish-like as I always was. Ah, many's the time poor mother has told me I was a fool for my pains. I might have had him if I had liked. But I never so much as cared to think he was coming after me. He was a good body for a friend—as you might say a walking-stick of a summer evening, and there was an end."

"Well, but you couldn't have married him if you didn't like him, anyway, Deb," said I, interested, in spite of myself, by the story.

"Ah, I should have liked the man well enough if there hadn't been somebody else by, my dear," said Deb, "and that's just the pity. But one fine day there comes along a stranger lad—a lad as I didn't seem to want to snub—well, not for more than the first week. It was hop-picking time, and we used to be in the fields together all day. He

never took particular account of me, more than for a joke and a laugh with the rest; but, my dear, he was as the light o' my eyes to me from morning till night again. I'm not ashamed to tell you now, it's so long ago. I daresay they all saw how it was; I daresay I was the jest o' the field. It don't matter now. I don't know as I much minded then, so long as I could get a word from him. He had always been kind and civil, helping me with the poles over the bin when they were too long and heavy for me to lift; and one day I was ailing and couldn't do my work, and he picked for me, and spoke so as I thought he meant courtin'. But, Lor' bless your soul, he didn't. It was only his nice, pleasant way. Afore the hopping was over I saw him kissing Bess Dawe down by 34 tower of a Sunday evening. The girls told me they'd been trysting it all the time, and he was going to wed her."

"Poor Deb!" murmured I softly; "poor Deb!"

"Oh, it's all past and gone now, child," laughed the old woman. "I've forgotten it, I think. It served me right enough for

going for to fix my fancy on a man that didn't want none of me."

"I don't see how you could help that," said I passionately. "I don't see how it's loving at all unless folk can't help it. And how were you to guess he wouldn't want you? It was cruel, cruel!"

"Nay, child, it weren't cruel. It were just natural, just as it had for to be," said Deb quietly. And then in her most matter-of-fact tones she added: "But it were a rare pity I hadn't wedded the other one, for he'd have made me a good husband."

"Oh, how can you talk so?" cried I. "Why, you wouldn't have loved him."

"Maybe it aint seemly for a woman to love," said Deb, considering. "The run of women marries the men because it's comfortable, and I'm thinkin' it's the best way. When a woman begins loving she do fret so over it. But the men they takes it cool and easy, and does their work atween whiles."

"Well, I'm very glad you didn't do it that way, at all events, Deb," said I.

"Ah, you wouldn't have had a sour old thing to rate ye, if I had," laughed Deb.

"But, Lor', I'm content enough. If I'd had a 'ome I'd have had cares, and a man alongside the whole blessed time, which I never could abide. But the Bible do tell us man aint made to bide single, don't it? That's as much as to say a girl durstn't throw away her chances. And so that's what old Deb's story was for."

"If you mean to say Joyce is to marry the Squire for fear Frank mightn't be faithful to her, all I have got to answer is—you're a horrible old woman, and I won't be a party to any such thing."

"Well, of all the obstinate, contrairy-headed, blind-eyed young women that ever I see'd in my whole life!" began Deb, planting her arms akimbo and looking me full in the face.

But she got no further in what seemed very much like the beginning of a sound rating of me. Joyce was coming up-stairs. The old boards cracked even under her light footfall. She was very late. Mother had been keeping her talking. Deb just nodded her head at me with an expression of anger, disappointment, impatience, and warning

mysteriously mixed, and went down-stairs without so much as a good night to my sister.

It was the last I ever heard from her on matters relating to the sentiments and affections. Such an upheaval of her busy, business-like temperament I should have thought not possible: it never was possible again to my knowledge, and the strange revelations in that apparently rough nature remain a marvel to me to this day.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The elections were over. They had passed quietly enough, and Mr Farnham was returned for our division of Sussex, as Squire Broderick had always said he would be. As far as I recollect, it was as every one had expected, and I don't even remember that any one was particularly disappointed excepting the Thornes themselves and Mr Hoad.

He, I remember, came to see father the very next day on business; and whether it was the "business" or the Radical failure I don't know, but his face wore that expression of mean vindictiveness which I had always instinctively felt it could wear, although I had never actually seen it as I saw it that day. He was closeted some time with father in the study. I met them in the hall as they came

out; I was just starting for the Manor with the basket of jelly.

"Ah, we should have won it if you had helped us," the solicitor was saying. "And I must say, Maliphant, it doesn't seem to me to be right to hold aloof when energy is required in the cause."

Father's under lip swelled portentously; it was the sign of a storm within him. But he controlled himself, and did not reply.

He turned to me instead, and said: "Are you off to the Manor, Meg? Well, ask the Squire if I shall come and spend an hour or two with him to-night, as he's laid up?"

The disagreeable expression deepened on Hoad's face. "Ah, your friend the Squire 'll be in fine feather," said he to father. "It's a precious good thing for him and his friend Farnham that that smart young nephew of his didn't come down and address the meeting the other night. He's an influential chap, and he's an honest fellow; he sticks by the ship."

Father looked towards me and said quietly, "Well, be off, my girl."

It seemed to bring Mr Hoad to his senses. He turned to me with that particular smile

which I so much disliked, and said: "Ah, Squire Broderick is a great friend of Miss Margaret's,—we all know that. It's not always the young and handsome that succeed with the fair sex, and we can't blame a lady if she should put in her oar on the side it suits her to trim the boat."

"Don't talk nonsense to my girl, Hoad, if you please," cried father angrily. "She doesn't understand that kind of stuff."

I didn't wait to hear any more. I lifted the latch and went out. But I heard Hoad laugh loudly, and as I closed the gate I heard him say: "Well, good-bye, Maliphant. You understand me about the loan? I'm glad the hops are looking well. But I'm afraid I can have nothing to do with any such negotiations as you propose about them."

I walked down the road with my little basket on my arm, pondering this sentence and Hoad's attitude altogether. It puzzled me. It almost seemed as though he wanted to pay father out for something. But what? Why should the election matter so very much to Mr Hoad? And in what way could he pay father out?

I could not understand, but I hated Mr Hoad worse than ever, and none the less for his vulgar banter about Squire and me. I suppose he thought girls liked such stuff, but he was oddly out of it in every way.

But neither Mr Hoad nor his words were long in my thoughts, I am bound to say. My head was so full of other things,—of things that seemed all the world to me because they concerned, and vitally concerned, that poor little, throbbing, aching piece of selfishness, Margaret Maliphant,—that I had little thought left for anything else. The day before had left a vivid impression on me; it seemed almost like an era in my life.

The way in which Joyce had received the news of Frank's accident, the strange and puzzling scene with Deborah, and, last but not least, the chance discovery of my sister and Harrod in the parlour, and the manner in which Harrod had answered me about it, inducing me, to my bitter regret, to try and quarrel with him in return — was it not enough to distress such a girl as I was then, living so much on sentiment and emotion?

All the morning I had been hoping to see Harrod, to have a little word with him that should set matters straight again between us—at all events, set them where they were before. Only two days ago I had been so happy with him on the ridge of the open cliff, I had felt so confident that my companionship was sweet to him, and now ajar again! What was the reason? And even as I asked myself that question, I saw Joyce sitting in the low chair by the fireplace, with the tears on her long lashes, and the dusky light upon her golden hair.

I was so intent upon my dream that I did not see the chief figure of it walking towards me until he was close at my side. My heart leaped within me for gladness; here was my opportunity. The demon—I *would* not give it its name—fled in the presence of a happy humility that surged up within me, and made me almost glad to have put myself in the wrong, that I might say so and be forgiven.

Ah, what was this terrible unseen power that rode rough-shod over every sense that had ruled me up till now? How was it that I fell so passively, so imperceptibly beneath

its might? how was it that I did not struggle? how was it that I had forgotten to be proud?

I think that there was a smile on my face as I looked up into Harrod's. I know there was a smile in my heart, but it must have faded away very quickly for his was quite cold. My courage sank.

I don't know what I feared, but I felt as if some unknown evil were going to happen. Yet, if I had been cool enough to notice him critically, I should have seen that he was not thinking of me.

"Has Hoad been with your father?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. "He has only just left him."

"I suppose he is very much annoyed about the failure of this election?" he said.

"I don't know," answered I, not caring at all about the election. "I don't know why he should mind so very much."

"Oh, I do," growled Harrod, striking his left hand smartly with a newspaper which I now saw he held in his right. "The vil——"

He stopped himself, and set his teeth.

"Yes, he *was* angry, I suppose," added I, recollecting the man's face. "But——" I wanted to say, "But don't let us talk of Mr Hoad," and I hadn't the courage.

"Well, I wish you would try and keep the paper out of your father's way to-day if you can," added he, more quietly. "There's something in it I'm afraid might distress him."

At any other time this speech would have filled me with curiosity and alarm, but just now I was so intent upon that idea of humbling myself and "putting matters straight" that I scarcely even noticed it.

"I suppose he doesn't often read it before the evening, does he?" added Harrod.

"Sometimes he does," said I. "I'll do my best. What is there in it? Something bad about hops?"

The preoccupied look changed into one of simple annoyance and anger.

"I'm afraid it is," said I, blundering and trying to find my way to the explanation that I wanted. "But never mind. As you said yesterday, hops are always very difficult

things, and father must know that quite well. It was very stupid of me to say what I did yesterday about them, Mr Harrod. I was talking foolishly. But I do know better than that, you know."

I spoke gently, but the frown deepened almost into a scowl on the bailiff's face.

"What on earth makes you think hops have anything to do with the matter?" cried he.

His lip trembled in that dreadful way I have noticed in him before. It was very slight, so slight that any one else might not have noticed it, but to me it was horrible. It terrified me. Yes; and two months ago I had never seen him look so. I did not know it was possible.

"I beg your pardon," said he, in a low voice; "but indeed the subject that I referred to in the paper has nothing at all to do with agriculture of any sort."

I did not say anything. I could not have spoken a word. He stood a moment with his face turned from me, and then he said "Good day" abruptly, and walked down the road.

Without looking after him I went on my way. I had forgotten where I was going; a great weight hung at my heart. Yet nothing had happened. I had stupidly harped on a matter which, I might have seen, annoyed him; he *had* been annoyed, and he had been sorry for it. What was there in that? Nothing. No, it was not that anything had happened—it was that nothing had happened. It was that every little thing that occurred day by day showed me more clearly that nothing could happen, that I had no hold, that the ground was slipping away from under my feet.

I walked mechanically forward. I was giddy, the air danced around me, and my heart went beating about in its cage. I kept repeating to myself that I had not said what I had meant to say; that if I had said what I had meant to say all would have been well. I felt instinctively that I had not touched at the root of the matter, but I did not know that I could not have touched at the root of the matter—that I should not have dared to go within miles of it.

And still I went on under the leafy trees,

with that unexplained hunger within me, until as in a dream I stood upon the broad steps of the Manor gateway. Was it forgiveness that I wanted of him? He would only have wondered to hear me say that it was needed. What was it that I wanted?

I rang the great bell which sounded so emptily through the hall. The sound called me back to myself, but even as the words of the message that I had come to deliver formed themselves upon my lips, a sudden resolve formed itself within my heart.

When the door opened, instead of merely giving my message, I asked if the Squire was at home. I daresay the man was astonished; it did not occur to me to think whether he was or not—I had not had enough experience of the world to think much of such a matter—and my purpose burned too bright in me for such reflections.

I was shown through the great hall which Frank Forrester had so cleverly decorated with flags and garlands on the night of the county ball—to the long room beyond, that looked out on to the lawn through three great deep-embrasured windows that en-

closed the landscape in their dark oak frames. I leaned upon one of the faded cushions of the window-seat and looked out to the garden. It was laid out in a large square of lawn, with a broad old-fashioned flower-bed flanking it on either side, but to the belt of trees towards the marsh it was free, and through the trees one had glimpses of the wide, sad land, with the sea in the distance, that we saw from the Grange; to the right of the lawn was the ruin of the thirteenth-century chapel, the tall, slender arch of the chancel, and the graceful little turret of the bell-tower standing out against the elms and sycamores.

How well I remembered that night of the ball when we had strayed out into the moonlight—the Squire and I—and when I had envied Joyce for having a lover! Yes, I had wondered to myself whether I should ever have a lover who would speak to me like that in the moonlight with his heart in his voice.

Joyce's white dress had fluttered in the shade of that dark ruin—cold as the shrouds of the ghosts who might have peopled it. I

remembered that now, as though it had been an evil omen. But then, nothing had seemed to me cold. I had envied Joyce for having a lover. Did I still envy her her lover?

A step sounded in the hall, and I stood up holding my basket with the jelly in it; my heart was beating a little with the strangeness of the place, for of the Squire I was not afraid.

The dark oak room was getting a little dim; I had not been able to get off in the morning, it was afternoon—late afternoon, because Harrod had detained me. A shadow over the sky without made very dark corners in the old wainscoting, that the heavy tapestry curtains made darker still. Everything was dark and old-fashioned, with a solid serviceable goodness, in the Squire's house. There were bits of delicate satinwood furniture, as I knew, in the citron-coloured drawing-room with its canary hangings, but here—in the room where the Squire sat—everything was for use.

I took it all in at a glance; the shelves that lined the walls—books and books and books for him who declared he did not read

—the carved settee by the hearth, the old leathern arm-chair from whence he must just have risen, the large table strewn with newspapers and pamphlets, driving-gloves, hunting-crops, dog-collars, and all kinds of strange implements that country gentlemen seem to require. An old Turkey carpet covered the floor, and a heavy curtain kept the draught from the door; it was a comfortable winter room, dim and hot on this warm September evening.

As I looked I remembered another room that I had been in alone not a long while since — a different room, looked at with different feelings. I shivered as I thought of it, just as I had shivered a moment since in the hot air without.

The Squire came in. He looked as though he had been ailing, but he did not look ill, and his smile was sunshine in its welcoming.

"Why, Miss Margaret, this *is* an honour for an old bachelor," said he. "It's worth while being ill for—or *saying* one has been ill, for there has been precious little the matter with me. I should have been out

long ago if it hadn't been for that tiresome doctor that Mrs Dalton insisted in calling in."

I smiled. I did not know what to say—how to begin.

"Mother sent you this jelly," I said, hurrying to get over the avowed object of my visit. "It's some we make at home, and she thinks it'll cure anything." I held out the basket, and then placed it on the big table behind me. "And father wants to know if you would like him to come to-night and have a chat," I went on hurriedly, before he had time to answer.

"Oh, I couldn't let him do that," said the Squire. "I heard he wasn't so well again the other day. I'm quite recovered now. I'll come down to the Grange. I should like to have a chat with him about the election. I hope your father isn't disappointed?"

"Oh dear, no; father doesn't mind a bit," said I impatiently. "But do come. I'm sure mother 'll be downright glad to see you at the Grange again. She says you never come near us nowadays."

"What, have I been missed?" said he, with just the very tiniest bit of sarcasm in his good voice.

"Why, of course," I answered simply. "You know how fond mother is of you—and father too. Excepting Captain Forrester, I don't think he gets on so well with anybody."

His face fell, and I was sorry.

"He's had more practice with me," he laughed.

"Yes," said I. "But he is so fond of Captain Forrester. He's dreadfully cut up about this accident of his. If it hadn't been for that Mr Hoad coming in and worrying him this afternoon, he was coming up to see you about it. But he gave me this letter, and told me to ask you to put the address on."

"Oh, Frank's all right," said the Squire, a trifle impatiently. "It's nothing but a sprained wrist and ankle. Only he didn't feel like coming down; perhaps he was half glad to get out of it. I'm sure he ought to have been ashamed ever to have promised to come."

It was rather a fall, after all the sympathy I had tried to win for Frank, and the reproaches I had made to Joyce for her coldness! But Joyce's strange conduct was none the less so because he had only sprained his ankle.

"I'm glad he is no worse hurt," said I, and as it came home to me how very glad I was, I added: "Oh, I'm very glad."

"The boy's right enough," repeated the Squire in the same manner.

He advanced to the table against which I had been leaning all this time, and said in a very grateful sort of way: "So you really made this jelly for me, and came all the way across here on purpose to bring it to me."

I looked at him astonished. One would have thought making jelly was dreadfully hard work, and the distance from the Grange to the Manor at least five miles instead of not one.

"Oh dear, no," said I. "I didn't make it. Mother made it, I only helped her strain it. And I didn't come here on purpose to bring it."

It was the Squire's turn to look at me,

astonished. "No, I came to ask you something," continued I hurriedly, rushing violently upon my subject. "Do you remember once — in the summer — Mr Broderick, you told me that if ever I was in any trouble, that if ever I wanted help, I was to come to you?"

"Yes, I remember it very well," answered he. "I meant what I said."

"I knew you did," said I. "That's why I've come." He came close up to me.

"Thank you," he said—and at the time it did not strike me that it was strange he should say "thank you"—"I'm glad you have come. So you are in trouble up at the Grange! Ah, I was afraid, I was sorely afraid it was coming! Sit down and tell me all about it."

He took hold of my hand and led me towards the oaken settle. We had not sat down before; I don't think either of us had supposed that I was going to remain more than a minute.

"It's about Joyce," I said.

He started, but he did not look distressed,

rather more surprised. "I'm dreadfully unhappy about Joyce," I repeated.

"Indeed!" answered he, concernedly. "How's that?"

"I promised mother not to tell anybody," I replied. "But I can't help it—I must tell some one, for I don't know what to do."

"Yes, tell me," he repeated.

"Do you remember that ball you gave here at the Manor last spring?" asked I.

"Ah, yes, I remember," answered he, I thought sadly.

"Well, Joyce was engaged to Captain Forrester that night," said I.

I saw his face grow stern as it had grown when he had warned me about Frank at first.

"Mother didn't like it; she—she wanted something else for Joyce," I went on evasively, not caring to let the Squire think that mother had noticed his liking for my sister—"she said they must wait for a year. Yes, and not meet all the time, and not write to one another. But it's not possible that two people who care for one another can go on like that. Is it, now?" cried I eagerly.

"Yes, it would be possible if they really cared for one another, Miss Margaret," he said presently, "but it would be hard."

"Oh yes, yes—too hard," cried I. "They *have* met. I managed it once. But now I want them to meet again."

"That's why you were so anxious that Frank should come down for the elections," he said. "I wondered why you were so anxious."

"Yes, that's why. Don't you see!" I explained. "And now that he has had this accident it's worse than ever. You say it isn't very bad, and I'm glad; but don't you see how bad it must be for Joyce? It can't be good for her, can it? And so I want you to get him down here, so that they can meet sometimes. You easily could. It would only be kind of you. He ought to be nursed up and made well again."

He dropped his eyes from my face where they had been fastened, and got up and walked away towards the window.

"There is no one to do any nursing here," he said. "Frank can go to his mother to be nursed."

"Oh, well, I didn't mean nursing," I hastened to say, correcting myself. "I don't suppose he needs nursing, if it's no worse than you say."

There was a silence.

"You *will* ask him to come, won't you?" repeated I softly.

The Squire turned round. His face was quite hard.

"No, Miss Margaret," he said, "I can't do it. I would do anything to please you, but I can't do that. What you have told me distresses me very much — far more than you can guess. I had feared something of the sort in the spring; but then Frank went away, your sister and he were separated, and when she came back from her holidays, well, — especially of late, — I made sure that there had been nothing at all in it."

He paused, and I wondered why, especially of late, he had made sure that there was nothing in it.

"If your sister cares for Frank, I am very sorry," he went on gently, "but I cannot but hope that you are mistaken."

"I am not mistaken," cried I vehemently, starting to my feet.

He looked at me with a strange pity in his eyes.

"Well, then, I can only hope she will forget him," added he.

"Forget him!" cried I. "Do you think girls so easily forget the men they love?"

"I think it depends partly on the girl," said he, still with an unwonted gravity in his tone, "and partly on the kind of love."

The words stunned me for a moment; they seemed to be an echo of something in my own brain that kept resounding there and deafening me.

"I don't think that Joyce will ever forget Frank," repeated I doggedly.

"Well, then, I can only say again that I trust you may be mistaken," answered the Squire firmly, "for I'm afraid that he will certainly forget her."

"I don't believe it," cried I.

"You can imagine that I do not willingly say such a thing of my own kith and kin," he answered, with just a touch of his old irritability in his voice, "but I fear that it might

be so. Frank's mother is an ambitious woman, the family is poor, and she has set her heart upon his marrying an heiress. In fact, there is a particular heiress to whom she is now urging him to pay his suit. He is a fascinating fellow, when he likes. I dare-say he will succeed if he tries. And he appreciates the comfort of having his bread buttered without any trouble. I'm afraid he might try."

I was silent—dumbfounded.

"No," added the Squire; "far from trying to bring your sister and Frank together again, I shall do my uttermost to keep them apart. I shall work upon every sense of honour that Frank has—and, thank God! he may be weak, but he is not wanting in a sense of honour—to induce him never to see her again. Then you will see soon, very soon, she will release him from the fictitious tie that binds them, and will leave herself free to choose again, and to choose more wisely."

"Joyce will never choose again," muttered I.

There was a great lump in my throat that almost prevented me from getting out the words. My tongue was quite dry and would

not move, and I was conscious of a cold chill upon my forehead and upon my lips, even though they were parched. I locked my hands together,—they, too, were quite cold.

The Squire came towards me—he came quite close. The room was very dim now, although the sun had only just set without, for the windows did not look towards the sun-setting. All the irritability called up by my insane obstinacy had melted out of his face; it was very tender. He looked at me again with that strange pity in his eyes.

"Ah, my child," said he, taking one of my hands in his, "why do you try so hard to persuade me that your sister loves Frank? Why do you try so hard to persuade yourself of it?"

Yes, why did I try so hard? I did not answer, but the lump swelled bigger than ever in my throat. I unclasped my hands, and let my arms fall down straight at my side, and looked up into his face. For a moment a wild impulse seized upon me to tell the Squire something of why I tried to persuade myself of that thing. I felt so sure of the deep, loyal friendship that shone out of his

eyes as he looked at me. It was as though he were some big, strong, unknown brother come to help me in my trouble: I had never had a brother. But the moment passed.

"You must surely know that it is not really so," he added.

And then I snatched away my hand.

"I know nothing of the kind," I said fiercely. "You said you would help me whenever I came to you, but you did not mean it. Now that I come to ask you, you will not help me. But I will help myself. I will help Joyce. I will write to Frank, and tell him that he must come back to her. I don't care what he thinks of me—what any one thinks of me. You are cruel, you are all of you cruel; but I do not believe that he will be cruel."

"No, I am not cruel," answered the Squire. "I am only doing what is right,—what I believe to be best for your sister."

"Yes, you are cruel," cried I, beside myself. "You are all of you cruel and selfish. Mother is cruel too. I know why she is cruel,—it is because she wants Joyce to marry you. And I know why you are cruel,—it is because you want to marry Joyce."

Oh, that the darkness might have come —might have come quickly and at once—to cover the blush of shame that rose to my brow! Oh, that the great window would have opened, that I might have rushed forth into the open air—away, away from everybody! How could I have been so unwomanly, so cowardly, so ungrateful?

I stood still—even to my heart—waiting for the Squire to speak.

At last he said, in a voice that was not in the least angry, as I had expected it to be, but that sounded to me deep and far away, and quite unlike his own—"What made you say that?"

The voice was so gentle that it gave me courage to look up. If all the regret that was in my heart, and all the sorrow for having hurt him rose into my eyes, they must have been very big and sorrowful that day.

"Oh, I don't know," I said, lifting up my hands as I used to do when I said my prayers, only that I don't think I had ever hitherto said my prayers with so much feeling—"I don't know. I don't know anything. I think I am losing my wits. Will you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," answered he. "But tell me what made you think that?"

"Oh no, no, don't make me say any more," I implored.

"Yes, you must tell me that," insisted he.

"Everybody always thought it," murmured I. "Mother used to say you would never think of coming down to the Grange so often as you used to do only to quarrel over things with an old man. Oh, I can't think how I can repeat such things! It's dreadful. But you see, mother thinks such a deal of Joyce. She has been quite unhappy because you so rarely come now. You must forgive her, and me too. *I* thought it just the same. Only Joyce didn't. She's not that sort of girl. And father didn't. If mother ever hinted at it, he told her that you would never think of wedding out of your own class, and that, indeed, he would never have allowed it. Father is very proud."

"Yes," answered the Squire, "and he is right. But such pride is a poor thing compared with a deep and honest love. There is a girl, not of what is called my own class,

whom I would marry if she would have me, but her name is not Joyce Maliphant."

"Not Joyce!" cried I, genuinely surprised, genuinely disappointed, and for a moment forgetting all my many emotions.

"No," he said gravely.

He did not try to take my hands again. I dropped them down once more, and stood looking at him. His eyes seemed to travel through mine into my heart. Their look frightened me, it was full of such a wonderful tenderness. I had never thought before that his eyes were beautiful; good, kind, frank blue eyes—nothing more. But as I remember them that night, I think they must have been beautiful.

"What do you mean?" I murmured.

"I mean that I love *you*," answered he.

I don't know what I did. I think I crept backwards, away from him, till I stumbled upon a chair, and that then I fell into it. I was stunned.

"How is it that you didn't guess it?" asked he tremulously.

I did not answer; I could not. I believe I covered my face with my hands.

"I don't want it to distress you," said he. "Whatever you may do about it, please remember that it will not have distressed me. At no time will you have brought me anything but pleasure. I think I understand a little, and I will not trouble you now. I did not mean to have told you. It slipped out because of what you said. Go home and forget it. Only, if at any time you should be lonely and need love, remember that I have always loved you. Yes, ever since you were a little girl, and used to come and have your frock mended in the housekeeper's room. I am not a sentimental sort of fellow, you know. It's not my way. I shall never be that; I shall never fret. But I shall always love you as I do now."

He did not make one step towards me; he remained where I had left him, standing in the middle of the hearthrug. Still stunned, bewildered, ashamed, I struggled to my feet and walked towards the door.

"Good-bye," said he.

"Good-bye," murmured I mechanically.

I stood outside in the quiet evening, on the

steps of the Manor gateway. Vaguely I remembered that as I had rung the great echoing bell there had been a craving in my heart for something that I could not reach,—for something which the request I was going to make might perhaps help me to secure. Was that something love, and had I secured it?

CHAPTER XXXV.

One morning about a week after my visit to the Manor, mother and I chanced to be alone together in the dairy.

I had spent the last days in a trance. I seemed to have lost all count with myself; only, as I look back across the years that intervene, I am certain of one thing—I was glad that the Squire loved me.

In the turmoil of surprise, of something akin to fear, of the vague, wretched sense of crookedness throughout, and of a touch of some sort of remorse at what I had unwittingly done, there shone forth one bright, sharp ray of light; it was a sense of pride and satisfaction that this man, whom every day I felt more sure was good and loyal, should have chosen *me* to love. Beyond that I was sure of nothing, and was chiefly thank-

ful that there was no decision to take, and that I need tell no one of what had happened. The Squire had been kind; he had asked no question, and needed no answer.

The hop-picking was about to begin, and mother was arranging how much milk should be set apart for the hoppers: she never made her usual quantity of butter in hopping time; she always said that butter was a luxury, and that she wasn't going to have working folk deprived of their proper quantity of milk so that those who didn't work should have butter.

Things had not been cheerful at home this while past. To be sure, though I went about my duties with a feverish energy, and mother had no more occasion to upbraid me for those "moping silly ways," I was seeing things myself through a dark haze; yet I do not think it was entirely my fancy that matters seemed gloomy.

I had not been able to get hold of that newspaper that Harrod begged me to keep out of father's way; he had seen it before I got home, and had taken it away with him, and I never found it afterwards. All that I

could make out about it had been from Harrod, who had answered my questions somewhat curtly, but had led me to understand that it had been some kind of attack on father for having held aloof from the Liberal cause, with covert allusions to certain reasons for his doing so remotely connected with the condition of his finances.

I could not make head or tail of it at the time, though a day came when I learned how a vile man can suspect an honourable one of his own doings, and then I was thankful to Trayton Harrod for having fired up for father as he had done. But at that time I only saw that father was visibly depressed. I could see that he could scarcely even bear Harrod to talk about the farm matters. There was a dreadful kind of irritability upon him which is piteous now to think of, as I remember how it was varied with moods of strange gentleness towards every one, and of an almost childlike humility towards mother whenever he spoke so much as a keen word to her.

Even to Harrod, with whom I don't think he ever had any real sympathy, he showed

sorrow for any sharp speaking by a very patient hearing, from time to time, of all the new schemes of that busy practical mind. But he seemed to have lost his love of argument, once such a feature in him; he seemed to be withdrawing himself more and more into himself. Selfish as I was, and absorbed in my own hopes and fears, it made me sad. Even in his dealing with the Rev. Cyril Morland, that feature seemed to have vanished. He was as eager about the philanthropic scheme as ever,—more eager, as if with a feverish longing that *something* he had undertaken should be brought to a good issue quickly. But though the two sat hours together, wrapt over details and figures, it was hard, silent work now, with none of that brilliant enthusiasm that there had been about it in Frank's day, none of the pleasant dreams, none of the sympathetic affection; and when, one evening, I surprised him in his study, standing almost as though entranced before that portrait-sketch of the young Camille Lambert, I hated Frank for a new reason for not coming to Marshlands.

But we none of us spoke of him now.

Even I did not—not even to Joyce. I had written him that letter that I had intended to write, and was awaiting the answer to it, but I did not speak of him. Mother was the only one who did; she spoke of him that morning in the dairy.

"Meg," she began, "I can't make out how it is that the Squire don't come to see us as he used to do. I've sometimes thought that you might have something to do with it."

I looked round quickly. I was alarmed.

"Why on earth should *I* have anything to do with it?" I cried. But I saw that I was distressing myself needlessly; mother was as far as ever from guessing the truth.

"None so very unlikely, I'm afraid, my dear," she replied. "You're but young, and you might even let a thing slip out without meaning it. And then you're masterful, and you've set your heart upon this affair coming straight between Joyce and the Captain, though the Lord alone knows why you should suppose a young butterfly such as that would make a better husband than Squire Broderick. The truth is, Margaret, I'm afraid you have been telling tales."

She had guessed part of the truth, but what a little part of it! I was silent, and she looked at me sharply.

"Of course if you have," said she severely, "it's just about the worst piece of mischief you could well have set your hands to. That other affair 'll never come to anything, as I guessed pretty well from the first it never would. The dandy young beau has got other fish to fry by this time, and, luckily enough, Joyce is too sensible to fret after a bird that has flown. She never did set that store on him that you fancied, and before the year's out she'd be very sorry to have to keep to her bargain."

"Well, however that may be," answered I, with an inward sense of superiority, "Joyce will never marry the Squire, so you needn't bother about that."

"You'll please to keep such remarks to yourself, Margaret," said mother coldly. "You can't possibly know anything at all about the matter."

Alas! but I was just the one who could and did know everything about the matter. As I think of it now, it is a marvel to me that

mother should have guessed nothing at all of what was really going on, but it was too evident that she did not. I suppose her mind was so fixed upon one thing that she thought of nothing else. After all, it is the way with us all.

"Am I to understand that you *have* been talking nonsense to the Squire then, Margaret?" asked she, in her most dignified manner.

It was not in me to tell a lie.

"I told the Squire that Joyce and Frank were engaged," said I, "if that's talking nonsense."

I did not say it crossly—I think my fits of fiery temper were becoming less frequent—but I said it without wincing, although I knew what mother's feelings would be. She sat down in a despairing kind of manner and drew in her breath, rather than let it out, in a long sigh.

"Engaged!" ejaculated she at last with a withering accent of scorn.

"Well, it's the truth," insisted I doggedly.

"No, it's not the truth, Margaret," replied mother emphatically. "*You* may choose to

consider them engaged, but *I* don't. And what's more, Joyce don't. I'm thankful to say I've one daughter who always had a grain of good feeling and respect towards her elders and betters. Your sister *never* considered herself engaged to the Captain."

"They were to be engaged if they were of the same mind in a year," said I. "Well, they are of the same mind so far, so it's practically the same thing."

"I don't think so," said mother, in a conclusive sort of voice. "But I don't need to discuss the matter with you. I must acquaint Squire Broderick that he has been misinformed. And meanwhile, I'll trouble you to keep yourself to yourself, and not discuss things that don't concern you with people outside the family."

Of course I deserved the rebuke, and I took it silently. But I could not help feeling a little anxious as to how that proposed conversation between mother and the Squire would resolve itself. If mother allowed the Squire to see—as I feared she would do—what she supposed to be the state of his

feeling, would he be able to keep from telling her that she was mistaken?

It was at the first of the hop-picking that she met him. That odd medley of strange folk, who go by the name of "foreigners" among the village hop-pickers, had already begun to appear upon the scene, and mother always went down at the beginning of the season to see that the poor creatures were as comfortable as possible in their straw huts, and generally to inquire into the condition of life with them. I can see her now scolding careless mothers for unkempt children, and careless maidens for rent skirts and undarned elbows, inquiring into the cause of pale faces, suggesting remedies, procuring relief.

She had gone down to the camp with Joyce, for she had sent me riding over to Craig's farm for some butter, ours had come so badly. Trayton Harrod overtook me as I came home. I had seen him in the neighbouring village, but I had spurred Marigold on, for I did not want to speak with him.

"You shouldn't ride that poor beast so hard, Miss Margaret," I remember him say-

ing as he came up with me; "you'll break her wind."

"Oh, dear no," declared I, laughing harshly, for I was in no soft mood towards him; "she's a very different creature to that old black thing you're riding, and she understands me. Mother's at the hopping to-night, and I want to get on to meet her there."

I lashed the horse again as I spoke, and she started forward wildly. We had just come to the place where there is a short cut across the marsh, and I set her to the gate. She took it like a deer, and flew as though she were borne on wings when she felt the turf beneath her feet. She made me dizzy for a moment, and when I looked back I saw that Harrod was on the ground—his horse had refused to take the fence. But even as I meditated turning back I saw him leap into the saddle again, and in a few minutes he was beside me once more.

"What possessed you to do that?" he cried, out of breath. "You might have had a serious accident. It was folly."

I did not answer. Indeed the pace at

which I was going made speech difficult, and he could not expect it.

"You're going too hard, Miss Maliphant," cried he again. "Stop the mare—if you please."

The peremptory tone irritated me, and far from doing as I was bid, I gave Marigold a touch with the whip. Her blood was already up; she reared, and tried hard to throw me. Mr Harrod leaned forward and caught at her bridle.

"Don't, don't," cried I petulantly. "You only chafe her; leave her alone."

But still he leaned forward towards me and held on to the horse, and still we thundered on over the soft ground across the empty plain. There was no road; we were quite alone, and at any moment I knew we might come upon some unseen dyke that would send Marigold upon her knees, and me over her neck.

I knew that if ever I were in danger of my life I was in danger of it then; but the sense of peril, and of the strong arm—*that* strong arm—ready to save me if it could, his breath that came hot upon my cheek, his

eyes that burned upon me though I could not see them,—all lifted me into a strange delirium of excitement, of anger, of delight. Yes; I think that, if I thought at all, I wished that that ride might go on for ever. But it came to an end soon enough: Marigold stumbled at nothing, she flew straight as an arrow from a shaft, until at last she knew her master, and was still.

"Now, Miss Maliphant," said he quietly, after a panting minute or two, "won't you be so kind as to give me that whip?"

I looked at him, my cheek was burning, my bosom rose and fell wildly.

"No," answered I; "why should I?"

He smiled. "Well, I know you won't use it again," he answered, almost vexatiously careless of my discourtesy. "I hope you have had a lesson that Marigold can't be tampered with."

"I wasn't in the least bit frightened," I said in a low voice.

"Upon my word you're a splendid girl," said he, still looking at me.

I felt my face grow redder than ever, but what I had said was no mere boast.

"But *I* was frightened," added he; and then, in a very gentle voice, "You won't do it again, will you?"

His temper had done me good, his tenderness was almost too much for me.

"No," murmured I; and the sense that he *cared* made my voice tremble so that I dared say no more.

"A girl doesn't know how soon she has played one prank too many. I can tell you that we ran a greater danger just now than we did when the bull was near tossing you. Do you remember it?"

Did I remember it? Ay, and many other things since then. The thought of them kept me silent, and kept my heart beating till I was afraid he would see it. Ah me, what would I have given to be back again under that five-barred gate, with Trayton Harrod standing over me, and all the future before me? But now—what was the future?

"Will you promise me not to be so foolish again?" repeated he gently. "There's no fun in breaking one's neck, you know."

My heart was big; he was very kind to

me, very careful of me—just as he had been always. I waited—waited for him to say something more, for him to lay his hand once again upon mine, though it were to check Marigold's bridle.

But the mare was going quite quietly now, and there was no need for him to lay his hand on her bridle. He did not seem even to notice that I had not answered his question. We were riding up alongside the hop-fields where the camp was set. Along the lanes groups of village hop-pickers were coming home,—whole families, who sallied forth every morning with dinners in bag and basket, and babies in blue-shaded perambulators. The conical straw huts made a circle under the maple hedge, and in the middle of the field the folk were filling their pitchers and kettles at two large water-butts on wheels drawn up there for their use. We tied our horses to the fence, and walked up. The women were beginning to light their fires, and father was expostulating with a tall, handsome girl who had begun to lay hers too near the dangerous straw.

She lifted a pair of splendid eyes upon him

insolently, but the words upon her lips were swamped in a smile, for he had stooped to pick up a crying child, and the little one had stopped its whimper at his tender words, and was gazing up at him confidingly. "It aint often she takes to strangers," said the young mother. "She's proud and masterful—and a good job too. She aint got no father to fight for her, and she may well learn not to trust the men-folk."

I don't know what father said—I didn't listen. Mother was talking to the Squire in a far corner of the field, and, though I was shy of seeing the Squire, I wanted to know what he was saying to mother. But it seemed only to be commonplace talk.

Mother took me to task for my disordered appearance, and asked me what I had been doing to get the mare in such a state, and Harrod came up and gave some kind of explanation for me, and then the Squire, shaking hands with me, asked me what I thought of the weather.

He was self-possessed. It was I who was shy, and who could find no words.

"I'm afraid we shall have a pocketful of

wind," said he, looking up anxiously at the sky.

It was a gorgeous sunset: banks upon banks and piles upon piles of cloud, fortifying the horizon, and flung wildly across the heavens, till, overhead, they were airy puffs upon the blue vault; seas and billows and cataracts of cloud, all of them suffused with rosy remembrance of the fiery furnace on the ridge of the purple downs—a gorgeous sunset; but the Squire was right—a stormy one.

"'Tis the Lord sends mists and 'eat, rain and gales, and we've got to submit, whether or no," murmured Reuben behind my back.

"I've thought of late Mr Harrod seemed anxious about the crop," said mother, "but it's *my* belief it's above the common."

I looked quickly round for Harrod, afraid lest he should have heard the remark. I need not have feared: he stood beside my sister, with a strange, dreamy look upon his face which I had never seen there before. There was nothing in their standing together side by side, but there was something in the way they thus stood—an indefinable sense of a

companionship in suffering, which hardened me to stone.

"I wonder you venture to have an opinion on such things, mother," said I, in a voice loud enough for him to hear. "Men don't like us women to have any opinions. They only like women who care for nothing but housekeeping."

Mother looked at me dumbfounded, and the Squire turned grieved eyes on me; Joyce bent her head, but Harrod glanced round at me with anger on his heavy mouth. Ah me, how sharply two-edged a sword was that bitter pride of mine!

I turned away and began to untie the mare from the hedge. The Squire came to help me. He did not speak, but he held my hand a moment longer than usual in his own, and I felt that *his* trembled. And when he had done at last arranging my habit over the saddle, he looked up at me with that same pity in his blue eyes that had made me feel so strangely a week ago. A disturbed feeling, half pleasure, half pain, stole over me, and as I rode up the steep lane in the dusk, under

the arching ash and pine trees, the memory of the Squire's face made me feel things less entirely dead and dreary in the midst of those vain and endless self-torturings, those angry struggles, those heart-sickening hopes and fears.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE reply to my letter came on the morrow from Frank Forrester. What a day it was! I recollect it well. All the summer had gone in one terrible storm of wind. Alas! Reuben had been only too just in his sad prophecy: the red sunset upon the citadels of cloud had meant mischief indeed.

The gale had burst that very night. Before midnight the wind was tearing up across the marsh like some live thing, rending the air with its threatening voice, almost rending the earth with its awful tread, as it swept, grieving, muttering, moaning, and rushed at last with a wild shriek upon us—a restless, relentless, revengeful foe. Even to me, strong and hearty girl, whom not even trouble and heartache, that was sore enough in those days, could keep from the constraining sleep

of a healthy youth—even to me that night the voice of the wind was appalling.

I lay in bed waiting and listening for its grim footsteps as they sped across the dark waste without, distant at first and almost faint, growing nearer and nearer, louder and louder, till with a yell, as of fierce triumph, the maniac burst against the windows, as though it would rend the house in pieces for its sport. Afar the sullen roar of the sea mingled with the lash of the pitiless gusts breaking, baffled, upon the distant beach, only to renew its unwearied attack with ceaseless, weary persistence.

I got up and looked out of the window. There was a cold moon shining faintly in a grey sky, where the clouds hurried wildly about as though seeking to escape some fierce pursuer: it gave a veiled feeble light, in which the near farm-buildings looked like unsubstantial things that the wind might lift in its unseen hands and scatter like dead leaves upon the ground. In the phantom whiteness the black trees waved helpless, beseeching arms, bowing themselves to earth beneath the mighty grasp of that great, invisible strength.

One could almost fancy it might pass into shape, so near and terrible seemed its personality as it advanced, sure and strong, across the wide, dim distance that was only marshland to me who knew that it was not sea.

Some one stirred in the house: it was father. He was coming up-stairs; he was still dressed—he had been sitting up all this time with those papers of his. I upbraided him for it, and said it was enough to give him his death of cold, but he seemed scarcely to hear me. His face was very pale.

"It's a rough night, a very rough night, Meg," he said sorrowfully.

"Oh yes, father, it is," answered I sympathetically, thinking of the hops that this would be the ruin of. But he made no allusion to them; he only said, "Those poor creatures down in the huts will have a bad time of it. And so many children too! They will be frightened, poor lambs."

And then after a pause he added, "Little David Jarrett was very weak when I called this afternoon, Meg. I'm afraid he'll not last out this gale. I think he would like me to go round and see him."

"Not now, father, not to-night?" I cried. But he did not answer, and I remember that it was with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded him to go to bed.

In the morning I was sorry that I had done so. The little lad was dead.

We were all seated at breakfast. The gale still raged outside; the garden was strewn with boughs of fruit-trees and blossoms of roses that the wind had ruthlessly torn from their stems; even from the distance of our hill we could see the white storm-crests upon the bosom of the labouring sea, and the snow of the foam as it dashed against the strong towers upon the coast.

Mother sat silently pouring the tea and looking anxiously across at father, who was eating no breakfast; Joyce alone was much the same as usual, for I—well, I don't know what I *looked* like—I felt wretched. The post had brought me the reply to my letter to Frank Forrester, and it was not what I wanted.

I sat moody and miserable. And to us all sitting there—very unlike the bright family that we generally were—came a messenger

with the news—little David Jarrett had passed away in the night. I can see father's face now; not sad, no,—grave, and with a strange drawn look upon it that I could not understand. His eyes shone out very dark and deep from the white face that almost looked like parchment; the shaggy eyebrows and strong tufts of grey hair a mockery of strength upon it. But this is as it rises up before me now in terrible reality; then I saw nothing, I guessed nothing. Oh, father, father, that the old days might come back once more!

He said nothing, he gave no outward sign of trouble; he got up and went out, and we cleared away the breakfast things. We were not given to expressing ourselves.

I took Frank's letter out of my pocket and read it over and over again. It was very short—there was scarcely anything in it—and yet I read it over and over again. He thanked me for writing,—it was very kind of me to write; he was sorry his friends had been so anxious about him; it had been a needless "scare," there never had been much amiss, and he was all right again now. He was sorry his friend Thorne had lost the

election. What did my father think of it? He was afraid it would be a long while before he should get time to come to Marshlands again. That was all.

No wonder I read it over and over again to try and find something more in it than was there! There were only two sentences that meant anything at all, and they made my heart wild with foolish, impotent anger.

"What did my father think of it?" And "he was afraid it would be a long while before he should *find time* to come to Marshlands again."

They were insulting, heartless sentences. Yes, even as I look back upon it now, with all the bitterness of the moment past, I think they were that. As if he—who had been honoured by my dear father's intimate friendship, who knew his views as few of his friends knew them—should not have known better than I "what my father thought of it." If he ever *found time* to come to Marshlands again, perhaps he would find out. Not a word of Joyce in it—not a stray hint, not a hidden allusion! Was it possible, was it really possible, that a man could seem to love

so bravely, and could forget in a few short months? Were the Squire's warnings just after all? Forget, forget? I repeated the word to myself. To me it seemed so impossible that one should ever be able to forget. At that time I don't believe I even thought it possible that one should live without the thing that one most craved for.

I sat there on the low window-seat, crushing the letter in my hand, looking out at the wild clouds that hurried across the sky, looking out at the havoc that the gale had made, and thinking perhaps of another havoc than the havoc wrought by the wind. But it was all Joyce's fault, I said to myself; she might have prevented it if she had liked. Why had she not prevented it?

Some one came into the room. I crushed the letter into my pocket and started up.

It was Trayton Harrod. He wore that same harassed, preoccupied look that I had noticed in him before: it maddened me, though I might have known well enough why he was preoccupied—there was anxiety enough on the farm.

"Where's your father?" asked he quickly.

"He's out," I answered shortly.

"I wanted him particularly," said Harrod again.

"Well, he's out," repeated I. "He has gone to Mrs Jarrett's. The little boy died last night."

"Oh, I'm sorry, very sorry," said he. "I know he was very fond of the child." And then after a minute he added, "But it's really very important that I should see your father at once, Miss Margaret. Could you not go across and tell him so?"

"No," said I ungraciously; "I don't think I could. I shouldn't like to disturb him." And then half penitently I added, "Can't *I* help you?"

He smiled, but gravely. "No," answered he. "I'm afraid this time your father must decide for himself."

"Is it ruin?" I asked after a minute. "I suppose so."

He started and looked at me sharply. "What do you mean?" he asked. "No, I sincerely hope it's nothing of the kind."

"Oh," answered I, "I was afraid there

wasn't a chance after this gale of anything but ruin to the whole crop."

"You mean the hops," replied he, as if relieved: and it did not strike me at the time to wonder what he could have thought I meant. "I'm afraid it's a bad look-out for them. That's why I want to see your father at once. It *must*, I fear, alter some arrangements I have made. I must telegraph." He paused a moment thinking; then he added, "Is the Squire expected here to-day, do you know?"

I flushed. "Not that I know of," said I; "but how should I know? He never comes to the Grange now."

I jerked out these sentences foolishly, incoherently.

"No, I know he has not been here quite so often of late," said he. "I've noticed it, and I've been sorry. But he'll come back. Never fear, he'll come back," smiled he, looking at me.

The heat in my face grew to fire. "I don't care whether he comes back or not," stammered I.

"No, no, of course not," answered Harrod

quickly, as though he were afraid he had said a foolish thing. "But *I* care very much. I have pinned my faith on the Squire."

Something rose, choking in my throat. How dared he say that he had pinned his faith on the Squire! In what way had he done so? what did he mean?

"I want to have a long talk with you one of these days," he added gravely.

I looked at him. I think my face must have grown white. I could not make my lips form the words, but I suppose my eyes spoke them, for he added, "about many things." And then after a pause again, "There's something I think Squire may be able to do that I haven't been able to do. I want you to ask him."

He spoke in his most hard voice; evidently it cost him a pang to have to say that he had not been able to do that something. "Of course it would be in a different way," he said half to himself; "and the old man is proud, but it's the only chance." And then he added, "and he would do anything for you."

My eyes must have flamed, for he stopped.

"I shouldn't think of asking the Squire anything—no, not anything at all," said I, trying to speak plainly. "I don't understand you."

"Well," said he, as if that settled the question, "anyhow I must get a word with your father this morning. Do you think you can help me?"

"No," repeated I, my voice trembling, "I can't. You had better ask Joyce. She will be able to do any of these things that you want, I daresay."

He did not reply. He just turned his back and went out. I think it was all there was for him to do. And as I stood there, looking after him, with my heart swelling big, and Frank's letter crushed in my hand, Joyce passed across the lawn to the parlour porch.

In a moment, unbidden, unsuspected, like a water-course broken from its banks, a great anger surged up in my heart towards her. She came gliding into the room with her usual quiet graceful gait, and went up to the old bureau to get a china bowl that stood there and wanted washing. She fetched it

and was going out again, but I stopped her. "Joyce, I want to speak to you," I said.

I suppose there was something in my voice that betrayed my feelings, for as she turned and stood there with the bowl in her hand, her face wore just the faintest expression of alarm.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have had a letter from Frank Forrester," said I. Her face flushed slightly.

"Oh, Meg!" said she.

"Yes," answered I defiantly. "I wrote to him. There was no reason why, because you were heartless, I should be heartless too. I have no reason for being so prudent. I wrote to him."

Joyce flushed a little deeper, but she did not answer a word to my cruel and unjust accusations: she was always patient and gentle.

"What did he say?" she asked presently.

"What *could* he say?" I said scornfully. "He thanks me for writing; but I ask you how much he can have cared for my writing, when the person whom he supposed loved

him didn't care to know whether he was dead or alive?"

"That's nonsense, Meg," said Joyce quietly. "He knew very well that I cared—he knew very well why I didn't write. Why should he expect me to break my word?"

"Why?" cried I vehemently. "Because if you had had a grain of feeling in you, you *must* have broken your word—you couldn't have helped yourself. But you haven't a grain of feeling in you. You are as cold as ice. People might love you till they burnt themselves up for loving you, but they would never get a spark to fly out of you in return. I suppose you *think* you loved Frank. Why else should you have said you would marry him? Was it because he was a gentleman, and you were only a farmer's daughter? No, I never imagined that," I added confidently, seeing that she made a movement of horror. "You're too much of a Maliphant. It *must* have been because you loved him as much as you can love anybody. And you'll be faithful to him, oh yes, you're too proud to be fickle. You'll hold on silently to the end, just as you said you would hold on. But,

good gracious me, does it never occur to you to think that perhaps such milk-and-water stuff might put a man out of heart? He may wait and wait for the ice to melt, but, upon my soul, I don't think it would be so very astonishing if, at last, the fire went out with the waiting!"

I stopped panting, and waited for what she would say. She lifted her eyes to my face—her dark-blue limpid eyes; there was no anger in them, only surprise and distress.

"Oh, Meg," she said sadly, "do you know that I think you sometimes make up things in your own mind as you want them to be, and then you're angry because they're not like that. Can't you be different?"

"No," said I, "of course I can't be different, any more than you can be different. We've got to make the best of one another as we are."

"Well, then, let's make the best of one another, Meg," said Joyce gently. "We have always done it before, let us do it now."

"I can't make the best of you, Joyce," answered I, half appeased, "when I see you so cold towards the man whom you have

sworn to love. I can't. I know you can't be different — people never become different — but oh, you do make me angry."

"I'm sorry," said Joyce penitently. "Don't be angry. Perhaps you don't quite understand, although you think you understand so well. I *am* proud, and I don't think I am fickle—but I am not cold either."

Why should her words have poured oil upon the flame which her gentleness but two minutes before had allayed? I don't know, but they maddened me.

"You're one or the other," I said. "You are cold or you are fickle." I went up to her and took hold of her by the wrist—the left wrist, for the right hand still held the blue bowl. "Which is it?" I said in a low voice. "Which is it?"

Her face grew pale, but she neither winced nor struggled. "Don't, Meg," she said.

"Yes, I will," cried I fiercely. "Which is it, tell me?"

"It's neither," repeated she.

"I tell you you lie," cried I. "You are as cold as ice. Frank knows it; Frank feels it. It is killing his love for you. Ah, go

away, for pity's sake go away, or I don't know what I shall say."

I flung her hand away from me and rushed towards the door. But the sudden movement had jerked the bowl that she held out of her other hand: it fell on to the floor, and was smashed into many pieces.

I turned round. Joyce had stooped down, and was tenderly picking up the fragments. She had self-control enough to make me no reproach—she was always self-controlled—but the bowl was mother's best blue bowl. The sight of her there, with her concerned face, irritated me beyond endurance. Was there nothing in the world that was worse to break than a blue bowl? I went back to her again and stood over her, watching her with hands that trembled and heart that beat to very pain.

"If you are not heartless," I said in a low voice—"if you *can* care for anybody's feelings as much as you care when the china is broken, who is it that you can feel for? You didn't seem to care very much when we thought that Frank had broken his back. Whom *do* you care for, then?"

I felt my lips tremble with anger, and, for one moment, I hated her.

Oh, that I should have to write it down! My own sister who had been all the world to me two months ago! But it was true. Even through all the crystallising, cooling mists of distance, I can recall the horrible feeling yet. I know that—for one moment —I hated her.

"What do you mean?" said she below her breath, trying to draw back.

"Ah, I can see very well how it might be," continued I, hurrying my words one on top of the other, breathlessly,—"how you might persuade yourself that you were true to him, and persuade yourself that you were doing a fine honourable thing keeping so strictly to your bargain with mother, when all the time it was because you never wanted to see him, and didn't care whether he loved you or not, and cared very much more whether somebody else loved you — somebody else who, but for you, might have belonged to another person. I can fancy it all very well," cried I, tearing Frank's letter that I held in my hand into little atoms and

scattering them about the floor. "I can see just how it might happen and nobody be to blame. No, nobody be to blame at all."

"Margaret, Margaret, for God's sake collect yourself!" cried Joyce, her voice breaking into something like a sob. "You frighten me. What do you mean? What can you mean?"

"No, nobody to blame," repeated I wildly, without paying any heed to her; "only just what one might have known would happen. One with every gift that God can give, and the other with—nothing but a vile temper that makes folk shun her even after they've seemed to be friends with her. What does it matter that you have promised to marry another man? Nobody knows it; and when one is as beautiful as you are, I suppose it isn't in human nature not to like to see one's beauty draw people away from what had been good enough for them before. I ought to have known it. There's nobody to blame, of course."

"Margaret," said my sister—and even in the midst of my fury, the firm tone of her

voice surprised me and checked me for a moment—"you must explain yourself. I don't understand you—I don't indeed. Perhaps, if you knew everything, you wouldn't have the heart to speak so. You are cruel, and you are unjust. You say I am cold. But even if I am cold I can suffer, Meg; you must recollect that—I can suffer."

"Suffer!" cried I bitterly. "I wish you could suffer one little tiny bit of what I suffer. Ah! for pity's sake don't let me say any more. Don't let me go on. Let me go."

"I can't let you go," said Joyce, with that unusual firmness that did crop up at times so unexpectedly in her. "You must tell me first what you meant when you said that I took people away from what had been good enough for them before."

"Meant!" cried I. "You know well enough what I meant. I meant that it was easy enough for you to be noble and self-sacrificing when all the time your thoughts were elsewhere. Yes, very easy for you to be patient, waiting for your own lover, when you were busy robbing me of my lover. Oh, don't speak, don't deny it. It's useless. You

have done it, and you know that you have done it."

I think I expected Joyce to be crushed—I expected her to cry. I stood there panting and waiting for it. But she was neither crushed nor did she cry. She was not even angry. She stood there quietly, looking away from me out of the window, and at last she said: "You're mistaken, Meg; I never wanted to rob you of your lover. If you remember, when first I came home I told you that it was my hope such a thing might happen between you. I always thought you were too clever for the folk about here, and I thought he was clever. But you know you told me, it never could be. You led me to believe you hated him, and always should hate him, because he had come to the farm to do your work. I believed it. Yes, until quite a little while ago I believed it. Then——"

"Well?" asked I, scornfully. "Then? What then?"

"Then, when I began to suspect that I might be mistaken, I resolved to go back and live with Aunt Naomi until matters were settled between you. That's what I

was telling Mr Harrod the day you came into the parlour last week."

"Oh, that's what you were telling him," cried I. "You don't say what he said to you that made you tell him that. You don't say if you also told him that you were engaged to another man."

"I didn't, because he said nothing to me to warrant it," answered my sister. "If he had, I should have told him that I was not free."

"Ah, you do mean to keep your word to Frank then?" asked I.

"I mean to keep my word to him if he wishes it," answered she in a low voice.

Her face ought to have shamed me, but it raised the devil in me.

"Well, if you still love Frank there is no need for you to go away," said I brutally. "Or is it because you are afraid of Mr Harrod's peace of mind that you want to go?"

"Oh, Meg, how can you?" murmured Joyce.

Yes, how could I? The evil spirit was stronger than myself.

"It doesn't occur to you that this fine

generosity of yours comes too late," cried I. "But the mischief is done. I won't have you go away now. I will go away."

"You!" exclaimed Joyce. "Where?"

"Not to Aunt Naomi's," I began scornfully; and for a moment the temptation rose up in me to show her that I too was loved, was sought,—to tell her where I might go if I chose and be cherished, I knew it, for a lifetime. But the memory of the Squire's face, of the little tremble in his voice, came back to me, and I could not speak of his love. "Not to Aunt Naomi," I said. "To be a governess."

"Oh no, Meg, I couldn't let you do that," said Joyce concernedly. "I thought perhaps you were going to say something quite different. I have had a fancy now and then of late that we were all of us mistaken in that foolish notion of the reason why the Squire has been such a faithful visitor to us all these years. Supposing it were as I fancy, don't you think you could grow to love him, Meg? He is worthy of you in every way.

She spoke with a strange pleading: her

words heaped fuel on the fire within me. She paused for an answer, but I gave her none. "He is coming here to-night. I heard him promise mother he would come. Oh, how I wish it might be about you. Do you think there is any chance?"

Her voice flew at me like a shaft from a bow. I felt myself grow cold.

"How dare you?" I cried. "How dare you?"

I could say no more—I was paralysed—I had no words.

Poor transparent Joyce, who had meant to be so generous, and who undid her work so thoroughly! How little I repaid her with my gratitude. She stood there gazing at me with a frightened expression on her lovely face.

"Go away, go away," I stammered wildly. "I want you to go away."

She made a movement forward as if to beg my pardon for anything she had said amiss. There was concern, pity, distress in her eyes, but I put her away. She went out of the room slowly, clasping the fragments of the broken bowl in her apron.

I threw myself down on the far window-seat. I did not cry—I never cried; but my whole body was trembling convulsively. I sat there in a trance till the latch of the front door roused me, and I heard some one come slowly, very slowly, across the hall.

Father came into the parlour; he came across to where I was, and laid his hand upon my head. The touch of it seemed to pass into me and soothe my troubled spirit.

"God help us to forget our troubles in those of others, Meg," he said gravely, after some minutes.

And then I remembered that he had just come from the deathbed of that little lad whom he had loved so well.

I think there were tears in my eyes then.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

The Squire came that night to visit us, as Joyce had predicted. We were still sitting round the supper-table when he came in—a gloomy party. How unlike the merry, argumentative gatherings of old! Joyce and I did not look at one another, but Trayton Harrod glanced now and then at us both. The traces of tears were on my sister's face.

But father pushed his plate aside untouched, and turned to the bailiff with his business manner.

"Will you see to those poor folk down at the camp having a week's wage before they are discharged, Harrod?" said he. "Those of them who won't be needed, I mean."

"We'll see first how many will be needed, sir," answered Harrod, trying to be cheerful.

"Our own folk will be enough," replied father quietly. "It's rough weather, and there are children down there. It's useless keeping them about for nothing.

Harrod was silent, and father lit his pipe. We none of us spoke of the little child whom we knew was in his thoughts, but mother sighed. I think that little grave was very near to another little grave that she had in the Abbey churchyard.

The Squire shook hands with me just as usual when he came in, looking full into my eyes, with such a concerned look of kind inquiry as made me feel ashamed of my heavy face. But I made an excuse to get away at once—I could not stay in the room. I went into the kitchen to make cakes.

Not long afterwards I heard the front door close upon Trayton Harrod—I knew his step well enough—and then Joyce came into the kitchen. I know I asked her what she wanted in there at that time of day, for I did not care for the Squire to be left alone with my parents, but she said that mother had sent her away. I saw Deb raise her eyebrows and purse her mouth in a way that

was, as we knew, a sure forerunner of some sharp, good-natured raillery.

"Oh, what was that for, I wonder? What's the secret now?" said she, wiping her big red arms, and then stirring up the fire with a sharp brisk motion that betokened her most biting mood?

"I don't know," said Joyce, but in a tone that said she knew very well.

"Well, well, we've all expected it this long while past," said Deb. "I'm glad it's come at last."

She plunged her hands into the dish-tub once more, and looked up with a comical expression of triumph on her ugly old face.

"I don't know what you mean," said Joyce faintly.

"Oh, don't you?" answered she. "Perhaps Meg does. Eh, do you know, Margaret?"

"I think you had better mind your own business, or talk of things you know something about," said I tartly.

But Deb only laughed good-humouredly.

"I suppose you make no doubt it's your

pretty face the Squire's after, eh, Joyce?" persisted she mercilessly.

Joyce flushed painfully.

"Don't, Deb, don't," said she.

"Well, my dear, no shame to you," added the old woman; "we have all thought the same thing. But maybe it isn't. Maybe Meg knows what he has come for, and is thinking over what answer she'd give him now."

"It wouldn't take me long to think what answer I should give *you*," cried I, fairly out of patience. "If the Squire wanted an answer from me, I could give him one without asking your advice, I daresay. But he's not such a fool."

"No, the Squire's no fool," retorted Deb; "but I'm thinking other folk aren't so very far off it. The Lord grant you don't all of you get a lesson stiffer than you reckoned for one of these days, my dears," added she, with a little sigh.

We said no more on the subject. Joyce soon went up-stairs on some household job, and Deb and I went on silently with our work. But before my cakes were ready for

the oven mother called me into the parlour. The Squire had left. As Joyce had hoped, he had spoken to mother about me.

I knew it the moment I went into the room. I am sure he had not spoken willingly; but that he had said something, I knew the moment I looked at mother. There was a flush upon her cheek and a light in her eye that told of surprise, but of pride and pleasure also. It proved how there was never really any favouritism in her for my sister, for she showed not the slightest disappointment that the Squire's proposal was for me and not for Joyce.

"Margaret," said she, sitting down in the big wooden chair opposite to father, who leant forward in his favourite attitude, as though about to rise — "Margaret, the Squire has just been here." She stopped a moment and half smiled. "The Squire is very fond of you, Margaret," she added gravely, going at once, as was her way, to the heart of the matter.

"The Squire is fond of us all, I know," I answered evasively. "He has known us such a long time."

"But he is fond of you in a different way to that," continued mother. "He loves you as a man loves the woman whom he could make his wife."

I did not answer for a bit, and mother, fancying, I suppose, that I must be as surprised as she was at the news, went on: "I had thought once it would be different, but now many things are explained. I think he has loved you ever since you began to grow up. It ought to make any girl feel proud, I'm sure."

"Yes," said I softly. And I did feel proud, quite as proud as mother could wish, but I was not going to show it in the way that mother expected.

"Of course," she went on after I had been silent a little while, "I quite understand how such a piece of news must come as a great surprise to you, almost as though it would take your breath away, I daresay. I don't wonder you don't know what to say."

Still I was silent. I stood by the table, twisting the fringe of the table-cover in my hand.

"I don't want to press you now," continued

she. "Take your time about it, and tell me your mind in a day or two."

"Did the Squire ask you to ask me my mind?" I said then, hurriedly.

It was mother's turn to be silent at that. And I knew that I had guessed aright, and that the Squire had probably only had his secret drawn from him against his will by some remark showing the mistake that mother too had made about his love for Joyce. I even felt sure that he had specially begged that I should not be spoken to on the matter.

"Squire Broderick was speaking mostly about your sister," answered mother evasively. "You know I told you I felt it my duty to set him straight about what you allowed you had made him think mistakenly about. And he was very much relieved when I told him there was no engagement between Joyce and that nephew of his. It's plain to see he thinks no good of him."

"Gently, gently, mother," murmured father in remonstrating tones.

"But I suppose in that way he came to

guess what was in my mind about him and her, and thought it best to put it right," concluded mother.

Of course I saw in a moment that it had all happened exactly as I might have been sure from the Squire it would happen. The knowledge gave me courage. "I will give my answer to the Squire himself when he asks me," I said bravely.

Mother looked at me. I fancied there was a half apologetic look in her eyes.

"The Squire will not ask you, Margaret," said she. "I suppose he's timid. I suppose all good men are timid before the woman they love, however much they may really be worthy of her — the worthier perhaps the more so. It seems strange, but the Squire 'll never ask you to your face. So you'd better make up your mind to it. Your answer 'll have to come through your parents in the old-fashioned way."

I went back to my occupation of pulling the fringe of the table-cover.

"But there's no need for you to say anything yet awhile, lass," said father, after a few minutes.

It was the first time he had spoken, and I looked at him reassured.

"Oh yes, I think I had just as well say what I have to say now," I answered, with sudden boldness. "What's the good of waiting? I shan't change my mind. I can never change my mind. I can't marry Squire Broderick, if that's what you mean he wants."

There was silence. Mother seemed to be actually stupefied.

"But perhaps, after all, it isn't what he wants," added I cheerfully, after a bit. "He's fond of me, because he has known me ever since I've been a little girl, and—well, because he *is* fond of me. But perhaps, after all, he doesn't want to marry me. I shouldn't think he would be so silly. I shouldn't be a bit of credit to him. I shouldn't be a bit suited to it. Not because father's a farmer, but because—well, because I'm not that sort of girl, like Joyce."

Mother had found her tongue.

"That's for the Squire to decide," said she. "I know well enough it's a rise for any daughter of mine to marry into the

Brodericks. Yes, you may say what you like, Laban," insisted she fearlessly, turning to father, who had looked up with the old fire in his eye. "Our family may be older than his, but as the world goes now he's above us, and marriage with him would be a rise for our child. And I think that it would be a very good thing for one of our girls to be wed with the Squire, and that's the truth."

Mother spoke emphatically, as though this were a question that had often arisen between her and father, as indeed I knew that it had, although not on my account. I looked round to see him fire up as I had seen him do before. I waited to hear him say that if the Squire thought he was doing us a favour by asking one of us to marry him, he was mistaken; but the light had all died out of his eye, and if his lip trembled, it was plain enough that it was not with anger.

"No doubt you're right, Mary," he said very slowly. "Let class and family and suchlike be. There's times when we forget all that. The Squire's a good man, a good man."

I was dumb. I had certainly never thought that father would want me to marry the Squire. But a retort that had risen to my lips at mother's speech, to the effect that I certainly shouldn't marry the Squire because it would be "a good thing" for me, died away. I was ashamed of it. It was so true that the Squire was "a good man," and I was proud of his love.

"I can't marry the Squire, mother, because I don't love him," said I humbly.

Mother rose from her seat in all the height and breadth of her soft grey skirts.

"You and I never were of one mind as to what we meant by love, Margaret," said she. "But you take my advice. You don't say anything about this now, but just go away and think things over in your own mind for a while. Maybe you'll see you're not likely to be loved again as Squire loves you. And maybe you'll say to yourself there aint anything very much better to do than to make yourself worthy of it. Of course I don't know—folk are so different; and there's such a deal talked about love nowadays, that most like it's grown to be something better than it

was when I was young. But it won't hurt you to consider a while anyway."

"It's no use," said I doggedly. "I suppose folk *are* different. But I can never marry a man I don't love as he loves me. I can't help it. That's the truth."

Mother had reached the door; she was going out, but she turned round. She was angry. The Squire was rich, a gentleman. She had known him all his life, and knew that he was a good and kind man, and would make a good and true husband. Would not any mother have desired him for a son-in-law? She guessed at no reason why I should not wed him, and I think it was natural that she should be angry at mere obstinacy. I think so now, but I did not think so then.

"You can't marry a man you don't love as he loves you," repeated she, with an accent of something very like scorn. "Well, my girl, let me tell you that the very best sort o' love a woman can have for a man is gratitude, and if she can't live happy with that she's no good woman. There's no happiness comes of it when the woman's the first to

love, for it's heartache, and no mistake, when she must needs pass her life with a man she loves more than he do her. There—I'm prating to the wind, I know. There never was a girl yet thought an old woman had once known what love was. You must go your own way, but you may take my word for it that your opinion about love 'll be more worth knowing in twenty years' time than it is now. A chit like you, indeed! At least Squire knows what he is about."

And with that she went out of the room and left me standing there, frozen into silence. The torrent of her unwonted speech, poured forth from the furnace of an unwonted fire in her, had fallen upon me like a cold stream of icy water. Had she guessed? Had every one guessed? Was I the sport of the community? Had I worn my heart upon my sleeve indeed?

I turned round to find father's gaze fixed upon me anxiously. I couldn't make out just what it meant—it was so full of a keen yet half-puzzled inquiry; but it was tender and sympathetic, and it soothed my ruffled spirit.

"You mustn't let mother's words hurt you, child," he said kindly. "Mother's tongue is sharp sometimes, because she puts things in plain English; but she's a wise woman, Meg, a wise woman. There are never any clouds and mists round the tract of country mother travels. She sees things straight."

"I don't believe one person can ever see for another," declared I stoutly. "However poor my opinion may be, it's all the light I have. I can't wait twenty years to decide what to do now."

Father smiled, but sadly. "Yes, we must all fight our own fight," he said, with a sigh.

"Oh, father, I can't believe you want me to marry Squire Broderick," said I, turning from the reflective side, which father so loved, to the practical side of the question. "You always used to say that you wouldn't like us to marry out of our station."

"My dear," he said, "there's many windows that'll let in light if we'll only open them. But sometimes we're a long while before we'll open more than one window. I daresay, if the truth were known, it wasn't all

at once the Squire made up his mind that he wanted to marry out of *his* station. We mustn't forget that, Meg. It shows he loves you truly, child, and that he's a man above the common. The Squire's a good man—a good man and true. And, after all, that's more than theories and suchlike."

I looked up at father anxiously.

"Would you have liked to see me the Squire's wife, father?" asked I.

He held out his hand, beckoning me to him, and I went and knelt down at his side.

"Meg," said he, "you've always been a good girl, a bright, brave, smart girl, with understanding of things beyond your years, though, maybe, sometimes that very thing in you has led you to be less wise than quieter folk. You've often been a help and a comfort to me."

My heart swelled big within me, and I could not speak.

"Now, if I say something to you that I wouldn't trust every girl with, will you promise me to be just as wise as you are brave?"

"Yes, father," whispered I.

"I'm afraid when I'm gone, Meg, that mother won't be so well off as I had hoped to leave her."

"Why, what does that matter?" cried I, with the scorn of a youthful and energetic and also of an inexperienced spirit for such a thing as poverty. "So long as we live in the old place, we needn't mind having to be a little more economical. Mother's very lavish now."

Father only sighed. "Besides," continued I, "you're not an old man yet, father. You've many years before you, and the hops 'll be better another time."

I said it hopefully, but something in my heart misgave me. I lifted my face to find those grey eyes—dark in the fire's uncertain light—fixed upon me tenderly.

"Child, I don't believe I'm long for this world," said he gravely. "I don't want mother to know it. Time enough when the day comes, but the doctor has told me that I carry a disease within me that may kill me at any moment."

I felt all the blood ebb away from my heart.

I clasped his hand tightly, but I did not speak.

"That's right. You're a brave girl," said he with a smile. "But you see, when I'm gone, there 'll be nobody but you to take care of mother."

"Doctors are often wrong," murmured I faintly.

"Yes, yes, so they are," answered father, "and I may last many a year yet; but if it were possible, I want to be prepared,—I want some one else to be prepared. Perhaps I've done wrong to tell you, Meg. Perhaps it's too heavy a burden for a young heart."

"No, no," cried I eagerly, though in truth I was frozen with the terrible fear. "I like you to trust me—I like to think you lean upon me."

"I do trust you," repeated he, resting his hand upon my head in that way that he sometimes had. And then he added, "and I trust Squire Broderick too."

I was silent. I began to see his drift.

"The Squire will always be our friend," I said. "He has told me so."

"I'm sure of that," replied my father. "But don't you see, Meg, that if the Squire wants to marry you, it will be difficult for him to be just the same to you as he has always been."

"Will it?" said I doubtfully.

"I'm afraid it might be so," answered he. "But of course that must make no difference. I can't teach you what to do in this matter. Nobody can teach you. You must do what your heart tells you. But you're a young lass yet, and if ever you come to think differently of the thing, remember what I said to you to-day, dear, and don't let any fancied pride stand in your way. Where hearts are true and honest, there's no such thing as pride; I learn that the older I grow."

"I will remember it, father," answered I religiously, and something in my heart forbade me to add, as I wanted to, "but I never shall think differently."

How could I tell him that I loved a man who had never spoken to me of love—whom I had every reason to suppose loved another woman, and that woman my own sister? No; I had not the courage so to humble

myself; I had not the courage so to grieve him. Mother's voice sounded without. "Bring in prayers, Joyce," called she, using the well-known topsy-turvy phrase that I had known ever since I was a child. "It's late enough."

But as I knelt there that night, mingling my voice with the voices of all those I loved, in the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer, I thought God had been very hard to me, and the fear that He might even take away my father from me brought such a storm of terrified and rebellious agony, that I felt I could not honestly say the words that had passed so easily over my head these fifteen years: "Thy will be done."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A WEEK went by—silent, uneventful—the world of action and emotion as leaden as the sky was leaden above our heads.

Father led his usual life, and seemed in no way worse than he had been for some time, so that the sick fear within me was lulled for a while to rest, and, realising the emptiness of the present, I forgot the possibility of even greater evil in the future.

For the summer was gone—the summer that even the oldest people in the village declared to have been more wonderfully bright and long than any they had ever seen: September closed with a whirl of storms and a drenching of bitter rain.

In the deserted hop-gardens—strewn with the unpicked tendrils of the ruined crops, or studded with the conical tents of the stacked

ash-poles — only dead ashes recorded the merry flames that had leapt up towards the merry faces: the summer was gone, and everywhere trees and hedges were turning to ruddy tones upon the brooding sky.

Ah, me! Harvesting had slipped into winter before, and green leaves had turned to gold, and summer birds had flown to southern homes, but never had storms followed so quickly upon sunshine, nor flowers withered so fast upon their stems, nor hopes fallen so quickly to the ground!

But the uneventful week was to end in events. It was the 1st of October. I remember it because it was mother's birthday, and the Squire, who had never before failed to come and congratulate her personally, only sent his gift of flowers by a servant. I know I felt guilty, and realised something of what father had meant, for I fear mother was hurt.

When I went into the parlour at tea-time, mother and the bailiff were there alone. They were evidently engaged in a deep and earnest conversation.

I thought it was about Mr Hoad, who had

rarely been at the Grange of late, but who was closeted with father that afternoon, somewhat to my own vague anxiety. I had a notion that mother had spoken to Harrod upon the subject before, and thought at first that her sudden silence was only because she did not care for one of us girls to know that she so far confided in the bailiff. But a certain half-confused look, that was very foreign to mother, led me to wonder whether, after all, she had been talking to him about Mr Hoad that time; and when she sent me to call father in she bade me shut the door after me, although I was only going across the passage.

If I had not been so very preoccupied, I should have been more alarmed than I was at the sound of Mr Hoad's voice, raised in loud tones, as I approached the library door, and I should have taken more anxious note of father's face, as he only just opened it to bid me tell mother he was busy just now, but would come presently.

She looked vexed when I gave her the message, and took her seat before the tea-tray with an aggrieved air. "I don't know why, if Mr Hoad doesn't care to drink tea

with us himself, he should choose this particular moment to keep your father busy and away from his food," she complained.

"I suppose it's something very particular," said Joyce in her even tones, and without noticing the frown on Harrod's brow. "Mr Hoad is always so polite—it must be something particular."

"Very particular!" repeated mother, pursing up her lips. "I don't know why it should be so particular it couldn't be said at the table, only that men must always needs fancy they've got very weighty and secret matters on hand. It was only about those unlucky hops, for I heard him mention them as he went in. Why he must needs remind father of his losses I don't know. It's bad enough without that, and when I wanted him to cheer up a bit. The hops can't matter to Mr Hoad. But men are so stupid and inconsiderate."

We finished tea and drew round the fire. It was dark—half-past six o'clock and more—and we had had tea by lamplight. Mother remarked how quickly the evenings were drawing in. Then she suggested sending again

for father, but Harrod begged her to be patient.

"Mr Hoad must be going soon or he will have a dark drive home," he said.

I laughed. "There is a moon," said I, "unless the clouds have swallowed it." And I got up to go out on the terrace and see.

The voices in the library rose and fell as I opened the door. I heard father's deep tones, strong and firm, and Mr Hoad's lighter and jarring. Joyce rose too and followed me, and so did Trayton Harrod.

The library window stood ajar as we crossed the lawn.

"You'll pull through all right," came Mr Hoad's voice, "Squire Broderick's your friend. You were wise not to stick to your colours over that election business. It would have offended him. He's not a poor devil like me who must needs look to the pence. He can afford to be generous about debts and rents. And if rumour says true, there's one of your young ladies can give him all he needs for reward."

I stopped, paralysed. Had Joyce heard?

But Trayton Harrod strode past me to where she stood a few steps before us. "Miss Maliphant, you must fetch a wrap for your head," he said hurriedly; "the mist is falling."

She went in obediently. I noticed she always did behave obediently towards him now. If she had heard, she gave no sign of it. Probably she had not understood.

Some one stepped forward inside the room and fastened the window. I heard no more.

"Come down on to the terrace," said Harrod authoritatively. "We can wait for your sister there."

He led the way and I followed, but I looked at him. Had he also not heard, not understood? Oh yes, he had heard, and he had understood—as I had understood.

"What did that man mean?" cried I, looking at him straight in the eyes.

We had not spoken to one another frankly and freely for some time, but this had roused me.

"The fellow is a low cur," he said.

"Yes; but what did he mean?" insisted I.

"I've always known that, but I want to know what he meant by talking as he did of Squire Broderick."

Trayton Harrod was silent.

"Mr Harrod, if you know you must, please, tell me," said I firmly.

He had looked away from me, but now he turned his face to me again.

"Yes, I will tell you," answered he simply. "I think it is well you should know. The farm is in a bad way,—perhaps you have guessed that. I have not been able to do what I hoped to do when I first came to it. I have not been successful."

He spoke in a heavy, dispirited tone; it roused afresh all the sympathy that had been stifled awhile by my bitter passion. "Don't say that," I cried. "You have done a great deal. I am sure father thinks so,—and I think so," I added softly. "But you have been hampered."

"Well, anyhow I have failed, and the farm is in a bad way," he repeated rather shortly. "Your father has been pressed for money, probably not only since I have been here; he has been obliged to get it as best he could

to pay the men's wages. He has got some of it from Hoad."

"From Hoad!" repeated I. "Not as a favour?"

"No," continued he with a laugh, "your father is indebted to Hoad, probably, for a large amount. I fear it. But not as a favour. Hoad is the man to know well enough what rate of interest to charge. And he is threatening now to press him for payment. So long as your father could be useful to him, so long as he hoped to get his help towards securing the Radical seat for Thorne, he was forbearing enough—made out that he would wait any length of time for it, I daresay. But now it's a different matter. Thorne lost the seat and Mr Hoad some advantage he would have had out of the affair. He doesn't mean to be considerate any more. He means to press for his money.

"How could father ever trust such a man, ever have any dealings with him?" cried I indignantly. "It's horrible to think he could have done it. But now of course he must be paid at once, and we must never, never see him again."

Harrod was silent.

"Why does father stop there arguing with him?" cried I, looking back towards the library window. "How can he condescend to do it? Why doesn't he pay him his money and tell him to be off?"

"Perhaps your father hasn't got the money, Miss Margaret," said Harrod slowly, after a pause.

"Not got it!" cried I. "How much is it?"

"I don't know," he answered, "but I'm afraid it's more than your father has at hand at the moment. He must need all his ready cash to pay the men, and there's the rent due presently."

"The rent!" echoed I, under my breath. "The rent is due to Squire Broderick."

"Yes," agreed Harrod.

"Father has been punctual with his rent all his life," continued I proudly—"I've often heard him say so. Nothing would persuade him to be a day late with the rent."

"No, of course," said Harrod quickly.

And then he was silent. I flushed hot in the dim light.

I knew now what Mr Hoad had meant,

and I hated him in my heart worse than I had ever hated him before, for what he had meant.

"But that's what Hoad counts on," continued Harrod rapidly, as though suddenly making up his mind to speak. "He is a low, vulgar fellow, and he would think such a thing natural enough. He can see no other reason why your father should not have consented to stand by his candidate at the election."

A sudden revelation came to me.

"Was that what the article was about that you tried to keep out of father's way?" I asked.

He nodded. My heart flamed with anger at the treachery of the man who had called himself father's friend, but through it there was a very broad streak of gratitude to the man who had been his friend without calling himself so.

But I did not say so; I only repeated aloud what I had told myself inwardly.

"I hate him," I said. "Whatever happens, he will never get his money that way. But, oh, isn't it horrible to think that father should

owe money to such a man! Is there no way in which he could be paid off now—at once?"

"Not any that I can see," said Harrod sadly.

"Won't there be any money coming in for the hops?" I asked again eagerly.

"Oh, if the season had been good for the hops!" echoed Harrod. And then he stopped short.

I did not ask any more, but I understood a great deal in that short sentence, and when I thought over all that he had said, I understood more still: that perhaps he had guessed long ago, when he first came, in what position father then stood; that perhaps he had even advised the hop speculation as a last chance, having, as I knew he had, special facilities for disposing of a good crop. He had worked for us, he had our interests at heart, but the task that he had undertaken had been harder than he had guessed: knowing him as I did, I knew how very, very bitter must be to him the sense of failure. His work,—that was the first thing with him, and he had failed in it.

"If it hadn't been for you, things would be much worse than they are," said I at last,

full of a really simple and unselfish sympathy. "You have done a great deal for the farm."

"It might have been of some use if the circumstances had been different," said he, half testily. "As it is, I have done no good, no good at all. But that's neither here nor there. The thing is what to do now."

"Must something be done at once?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes," answered he briefly, "at once."

I was silent, looking out over the plain. The last of the daylight was dead; the moon fled in and out among the clouds that swept, swift and soft, over the blue clouds of the deep night-sky; on whose bosom she lay cradled sometimes as in a silver skiff, but that again would cross her face with ugly scars or hide her quite from sight, — a murky veil that even her rich radiance could only inform with brightness as a memory upon the hem of it. The marsh always looked wider and more mysterious than ever under such a sky as that, until no one could have told where the land ended and sea began; it was all one vast, dim ocean,—billows of land and billows of water were all one.

I could not but think of the night, three months ago, when I had stood there on that very spot with Trayton Harrod, and when, at my request, he had consented to stay on at the farm and help us. He had stayed on, and he had done what he could. Was it his fault if he had not brought us help and happiness?

I remembered the night well; I remembered that then it had been warm, whereas now it was chilly.

The twilight had faded, and the night was dark, save for that fitful, fickle moon. A thin gauze of cloud hung now before the white disc, and the light that filtered through it showed another thin gauze of mist floating above the sea of dark marshland; the breeze that crept up among the aspens on the cliff had scarcely a memory of summer.

"What can be done?" asked I, in answer to that brief, terse declaration.

"There is only one thing that I can see," said he. "You are right,—Hoad must be paid. It is not a matter of choice. The money must be borrowed to pay him with"

"Borrowed!" cried I. "From whom could we borrow it, even if we would? There is nobody who would lend us money."

"Yes, there is one man," said Harrod quietly.

"You mean Captain Forrester," said I. "Because you have seen him here so intimately with father. But I assure you"—I stopped. I had begun disdainfully, but I ended up lamely enough — "he has no money."

"No, I did not mean Captain Forrester," answered Harrod, with what I fancied in the half light was a smile upon his lips—"I mean Squire Broderick."

I flushed again. I did not look at him.

"Father would never think of asking Squire Broderick to lend him money," I said quickly.

"No, I daresay not," answered the bailiff. "Your father is a very proud man, and however well he may know the Squire is his friend, they have not always exactly hit it off. But you, Miss Margaret, you could ask him, and for your father's sake you would."

"Oh, no, indeed I wouldn't," said I, almost

roughly. "It's the last thing in the world that I would do." And then I turned quickly round. "Joyce hasn't come down," I added. "We had better go back and look for her."

I moved away a couple of steps, but he didn't follow, and I stopped.

"Don't go in just yet," he said. "Your mother does not need you. I want to talk to you a little. We used always to be such good friends; but we haven't had a talk for a long while."

I stood still where I was.

"If it's about borrowing money of the Squire that you want to talk to me, I don't think it would be any use for you to trouble," said I, with my back still turned to him. "I shouldn't think of asking him to lend father money,—not if I thought ever so that he would do it."

"Of course he would do it to please you," said Harrod frankly. "He loves you. But I quite understand how that might be more than ever the reason for your not asking him."

I did not answer; the suddenness of the

way in which this had come from him had taken away my breath. It had not even struck me that he could have guessed it; and now that he should speak of it—*he* to *me!*

"It would be a reason if you did not mean to accept his love," continued Harrod ruthlessly. "But since that could not surely be the case, are you not over-delicate? do you not almost do him an injury by not trusting him to that extent?"

"Mr Harrod, I don't know how you dare to talk to me so," said I fiercely, but under my breath.

"Dare!" echoed he, with a little laugh that had an awkward ring in it, and yet at the same time a little tone of surprise. "I thought we were friends. Surely one may say as much to a friend?"

"You may not say as much to me," retorted I in the same tone. "And I don't know why you should think that the Squire loves me."

"Is there any insult in that?" smiled he. "I did not suppose so. Surely it is clear to every one that he loves you? I have seen it ever since I have been at the Grange."

"You have seen it!" ejaculated I, dumb-

founded. "Why, it was Joyce! — we all thought it was Joyce!"

"I did not think it was Joyce," said he.

I was silent once more. Ever since he had been at the Grange he had seen that the Squire loved me. What, then, had been his attitude towards me? What had ever been his attitude towards me?

"Well, if the Squire loves me, he will have to get over it," said I, in a hard, cold voice. I was hurt and sore, and my soreness made me hard for the moment towards the man to whom in my heart I was never anything but reverent. But the very next moment I was sorry; I was ashamed of even a thought that was not all gratitude towards him. "Perhaps," I added gently, "it is not exactly as you fancy. I am not good enough for the Squire."

"Not good enough!" echoed he, and there was a ring of genuine appreciation and loyalty in his voice which set my foolish heart aglow. "I don't see why not. Anyhow, *he* does not seem to be of that opinion, from what your mother tells me."

Mother! That was what they had been discussing so secretly.

"I'm sorry mother could talk about it," said I. "It wasn't fair. It's a pity such things should be talked about when they are never going to come to anything."

"Why is it never going to come to anything?" asked Trayton Harrod.

"That's my own business," said I defiantly.

"Yes, that's true," answered he. "But I had thought, as I have said, that we were good enough friends for you to let a little of your business be mine also. I beg your pardon."

His tone unaccountably irritated me, but his allusion to our friendship touched me nevertheless.

"You needn't beg my pardon," said I more quietly; "only I don't want you to talk any more about that. Mother may be mistaken about the Squire wanting to marry me. I hope he does not. If he does, I shall find my own way of telling him it couldn't be."

"Well, Miss Margaret, if I'm offending you by speaking of the matter, I must hold my tongue," said Harrod. "But I feel as if

I *must* tell you that I think you are making a great mistake."

I did not answer, and he went on.

"Your father is in a bad way. He would be very much relieved to think that one of you was comfortably settled for life. Apart from anything that you could do for him in this crisis, and which, no doubt, he has not thought of, you must see for yourself how that would be so."

"A girl can't marry to please her father," said I, "and *my* father is the last one to wish it."

"Of course," said he persistently, "neither your father nor your friends would wish you to marry against your will for *any* advantage that might result. But why should it be against your will? The Squire is such a good fellow."

"Oh, don't ask me to talk about it," cried I. "I know he is good; I know all you say."

"If the truth were known, I expect there's a good bit of pride in it," smiled he. "You are your father's own daughter about that. And there's the Squire, no doubt, thinks

he's not half good enough for you. A man mostly does if he cares for a woman."

"It isn't that. I can't marry the Squire, —because I don't love him, and there's an end," cried I desperately.

I wished he had never spoken to me about it; I could not understand how he *could* do so, even to please mother, at whose instigation I felt sure it was done: it seemed to me to be very unlike him, but since he had forced himself to speak, I must force myself to tell him that much of the truth. But I turned down away from him, and walked to the edge of the terrace.

Harrod, however, again followed me.

"Perhaps you don't know exactly what you mean by that," said he gently. "Young girls don't always. And they think, because a man is a few years older than themselves, that it can't be a love-match. But sometimes they find out, after all, that it was a love-match, only they didn't know it at the time. Wise folk say that the best sort of love comes of knowledge, and isn't born at first sight as some think it is."

They were mother's arguments. It was

out of friendship for me, no doubt, that he repeated them, but they were mother's words, and they didn't touch me at all. All that I felt was a rage, rising horribly and swiftly within me, against the man who dared to utter them.

I did not reply. I only drew my cloak closer around me, for the marsh wind rose now and then in sudden puffs that found their way to the very heart of one; they sent the clouds flying across the sky, and the moon disappeared deep down into a bed of blackness—so deep that not even the hem of it was fringed as before with the silver rim; upon the marsh was unbroken night. I can see it still—I can feel the chill of it.

And yet, within, my heart was hot, and it was out of the heat of it that I spoke. Shall I write down what I spoke? I can hardly bear to do it. Even after all these years, when fate, kinder than her wont, has helped me to bury all that spoiled past, and to begin a future upon the grave of it that has its foundations deeper still,—even now I am afraid to look at the stern record of my words in black and white before me. I am ashamed—not of my love, but of my selfishness; though

these pages are for no other eyes than mine, I am afraid. But I have set myself the task, and it shall be accomplished to the end.

"Can't you understand," said I, in a low voice, "that perhaps I cannot love the Squire because I love somebody else better?"

He was silent—he did not even look at me. He gave no sign of being surprised at my revelation.

"Are you sure of that?" he said, after a pause. "And is he as worthy of you as Squire Broderick?"

"Worthy!" echoed I. For a moment a proud rebellious answer flashed through my mind. Was he worthy of me—he who gave so much the less, for mine that was so much the more? But I trod the demon out of sight. Was he to blame if I gave the more? "What is worthiness?" asked I.

He did not reply at first, and then it was in a voice that somehow seemed to me different to any I had heard him use before.

"I don't know that there's any such thing," he said, with a sort of grim seriousness. "But a man can give the best he has, and I don't think a woman should put up with less."

Queer, plain words; there was nothing in them to hurt me, and yet they seemed to fly at me. My heart beat wildly; I could feel it, I could hear it, fluttering like a caged bird against the hard wood of the fence against which I leaned.

"The Squire gives you the best he has," said Trayton Harrod. "Does the man you think you love do as much?"

I don't know whether it was my fancy or not, but his voice seemed to tremble. I had never heard his voice tremble before.

"How can I tell?" said I, as well as I could speak the words for shame and heartache.

"A woman can tell fast enough," murmured he. And then he stopped; he came one step nearer to me. "And the fact is," said he emphatically, "it seems a shame for a fine, clever girl like you to throw away such a man as the Squire for the sake of a fellow whom she isn't even sure gives her the best he has. I've no right to talk so to you, and I couldn't have done it if your mother hadn't made me promise to. She seemed to think I ought. But, upon my word, I'm of her mind. You think you care

for that other fellow now, but if he don't give you what you've a right to expect, you wouldn't be the girl I take you for if you didn't put him out of your mind. There isn't anything in the world can live when it has nothing to feed on."

How every word seemed to fall like a stone into the bottom of a well! They echoed in my head after he had finished speaking. Another gust of wind came sweeping up from the invisible sea of water across the just visible sea of land. The moon made a little light again through a softer grey cloud, and shone with a wan, covered brightness upon us; the aspens on the cliff shivered — and I shivered too. The fire in my blood had burned itself out, I suppose, and the cold from without struck inwards, for I felt as though I were frozen into a perfectly feelingless lump of ice.

"I wonder what would have happened if the Squire's proposal had been made to Joyce, as we all supposed it would be?" said I slowly.

I did not look at him, but I felt him start.

"Do you think she would have accepted

him?" asked he. His voice did not tremble now—it was hard and metallic; it did not sound like his own. It drove me into a frenzy. All that had happened of late, all that had happened in the last half hour, had been piling up the fuel, and now the instinctive knowledge of the feelings that had prompted that last speech of his set a light to the fire. I was mad with jealousy.

"I don't know," said I. "If the Squire had proposed to Joyce, and she had known that she would help father, as you say, by marrying him, she might have brought herself to it. She is more unselfish than I am. *She* might have brought herself to marry one man while she loved another."

Harrod did not answer at first, but I felt his face turned upon me waiting for me to go on, and I heard him draw in his breath and breathe it out again as if he were relieved.

"What makes you think she is in love with another man?" asked he, in a low voice.

"Oh, I know it," said I, stung to the utter-

ance by the knowledge that he thought I meant with himself. "She is engaged to him."

My heart almost stopped beating, waiting to see where the shaft would strike.

It struck home. "Engaged!" muttered he.

"Yes," I went on quickly, perhaps lest I should repent of my wicked purpose. "She is engaged to Captain Forrester. They do not meet because my parents wished it to be kept secret for a year. But they love one another."

Oh, Joyce, Joyce, how could I have said it? A hundred excuses came swarming into my head, but in every one of them there was a sting, for through the buzz of them all came a strong, clear voice telling me that the man whom Joyce really loved stood at my side. I knew it, I knew it, and yet I let him think that she loved some one else,— I let him go away with an aching heart. That was my love for him — that was my love for Joyce, who, until he crossed my world, had been all my world to me.

I remember nothing more. I suppose he said something and I answered it, or else I

said something and he answered it; but I remember nothing—nothing until I saw him thread his way down among the aspens on the cliff and disappear on to the desolate marshland.

That I remember. I often see it happening. The moon still hung behind that veil of grey cloud; the breeze still crept chill among the trees, piercing to the heart; the faint white light showed a very wide world, wider far than in the brightness of day; there seemed to be a great deal of room for longing and heartache. But was the heartache in it all mine? In a moment the horror of what I had done came home to me. I who suffered had made others suffer.

"Oh, come back, come back!" I cried in an agony of grief, hurrying down the cliff till I stood over the marsh, waving my arms wildly in the dark night. "Come back! I have something more to say."

But he was gone. The moon was the same moon looking sadly on; the world was the same world as it had been ten minutes ago,—but he was gone. And who was to blame?

I came slowly up the cliff again—cold, stunned. What had I done? Where should I go?

"Margaret! Margaret!" came a loud, terrified cry from the porch.

It was the voice of my sister Joyce.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

That night father was struck down with the stroke that was to end in his death.

That was what the terror in my sister's voice had meant, when she had called down the garden to me through the chill darkness. So roughly was I summoned from the contemplation of my own woes and the mourning of my own cruelty to a sterner deathbed than the deathbed of my own selfish hopes—to the darkest experience that can cross any loving human creature's path.

He lay ill three weeks, but from the first we knew that there was no hope, and knew that none could tell when he might finally be taken. We took turns night and day watching beside him, and during the first dreadful night following his seizure I was sitting alone in the dim parlour waiting for my turn,

when, towards midnight, there was a knock at the door. I thought it was the doctor, who had promised to come again before morning, but, when I opened, the Squire stood outside. The bad news had crept up to the Manor during the evening, and he had come to learn if it was true.

For the first time that evening a little breath of something that was warm crept about my cold heart. I forgot that the Squire had wanted to marry me, and that I had practically refused him ; I forgot everything but that here was a friend full of real sympathy in our trouble, and thinking at that moment of nothing else — perhaps the only friend whom I instinctively counted upon in a world that seemed to me just then very wide and empty.

He stepped inside at once, and I told him what had happened, there in the hall, in a quick low whisper.

" There is no hope," I said. " I knew that quite well, although the doctor said that there was just a chance. He knew himself that he might die at any moment. He told me so yesterday, only I didn't really believe him."

My heart swelled at the recollection of that scene, but I did not cry. I wonder if he thought me heartless.

"How did it happen?" asked the Squire.

"Mr Hoad was with him. I heard them talking as I went out into the garden," answered I, sickening with the recollection of what I had gone there for. "Joyce says Mr Hoad went out suddenly, and then they heard father fall. He has never spoken since."

"Ah, if we could only have kept that man away from him!" murmured the Squire.

"Yes; and I feel as if it were my fault," whispered I. "He owed him money, and he came to press for it just now when the hops have failed and the rent is due. He is so mean that he had a grudge against father for not helping on Mr Thorne. But how was I to get the money? It was cruel, cruel to suggest it!"

I caught the Squire's eyes fixed upon me with a strange, pitying, questioning look. I did not understand it at the moment, but in the light of what I afterwards learnt, I understood its meaning.

I stopped abruptly. I felt as though my senses were leaving me—my head was whirling. I knew I had said something, in this moment of unusual craving for sympathy and support, which I should never have said at any other moment.

But there was no time to go back upon my words, even if that had been possible. I just caught those eyes that shone so blue out of the Squire's bronzed face, fixed intently upon me in the dim light of the little hall, when Joyce ran quickly down the stairs.

"Father wants to see you, Squire Broderick," said she eagerly. "He heard your voice, and he wants to see you."

"Oh, then he *is* conscious again!" cried I joyfully.

"Yes," said Joyce. "He is conscious."

She said it with a marked accent on the word.

"But——?" asked the Squire.

"He can't speak," added she.

I turned my face away from them.

"That means he is dying," said I. "The doctor said it might be before dawn."

All at once a cowardly, horrible longing to run away took possession of me.

"Oh, perhaps not," said Joyce gently. "We must hope while there is life. We can do nothing, he is beyond us. We must submit ourselves to whatever is God's will."

She was right. Perhaps for the first time in my life I felt all the awful force of it—that we could do nothing, absolutely nothing; that we must submit ourselves.

But why was it God's will? Again it angered me, as it had angered me once before, that Joyce should be able to submit herself apparently so easily to what was God's will. I was unjust. There were tears on her cheeks and mine were dry. We were different, that was all.

"Come," said she, turning again to the Squire, "he is impatient."

She turned up the stairs, flitting softly in her blue flannel dressing-gown, with the golden hair slipping a little from its smooth coils.

The Squire followed. I sat down on the old oaken bench below to wait.

"You, you too, Meg," said she, turning

round. The oak staircase was dark, but a yellow ray from the oil-lamp hung on the wainscoting showed her face surprised. Mother's voice came from above, and she ran on up the stairs.

The Squire came back again to me. "Come, dear," said he—and even at that solemn moment I could not help noticing the word of tenderness that had unconsciously slipped from him. "I want you to come, because afterwards you would be sorry you had delayed. When you see him you will not be afraid."

He took my hand and led me up the stairs, so that we entered father's room together.

Yes, he was quite conscious. Those piercing grey eyes of his shone as with a fire from within like coals in his white face; they were terrible in their acute concentration, as though all the strength of that once strong frame, of that once active mind, had retired to this last citadel; but, black under the shadow of the overhanging brows, they were the dear familiar eyes of old to me, and I was not frightened.

As we approached—I in my trouble still

letting my hand lie unconsciously in the Squire's—I saw one of those gleams, that I have said were often as of sunshine on a rugged moor, cross the whiteness of his face.

For a moment the effort to speak was very painful, but he took the Squire's hand in his —in both of his—and looked at me, and I knew well enough what he meant to say.

I did not speak. I could not have spoken if I would, for there was a lump in my throat that choked me; but I had nothing to say. How could I have found it in my heart to tell him that what he had seen meant nothing, yet what words would my tongue have made to tell him that I would give my hand to the Squire for ever? It was not possible. I slipped my hand out of his, but father did not see it. He was looking more at the Squire than at me; upon him his eyes were fixed with a strangely mingled expression of pride and entreaty: thinking of it now, it comes before me as a most pathetic picture of proud self-abandonment and generous appeal. It was almost as though he said: "I have wronged you. Creeds and convictions are nothing. We have always been

one, and you are my only friend. Help me in my need." So I have often since read that look in his deep, sorrowful eyes. My dear father! Should I say my poor father? No, surely not. Yet at that moment I thought so. I wanted to do something for him, and the only thing that I might have done I would not do. But the Squire came to the rescue.

"I know," he said tenderly; "be at rest. I will take care of them all."

Not I will take care of *her*. "I will take care of them all."

My heart went out to him in thanks. He had said I should have courage. He had given me courage.

When he was gone, I took my place at the bedside. I was no longer afraid of Death, or if I was afraid, my love was more than my fear: I stayed beside father till the end. I was thankful that the end did not come for those three weeks. He did not suffer, and he grew to depend upon me so—to turn such trustful and loving eyes upon me whenever I came near him, that they took me out of myself as nothing else could have done.

Dear eyes that have followed me all through the after-years to still the pangs of remorse, and to warm the coldness of life. Ah me! and yet those were sore days. Knowing that he was taking comfort as he lay there from the thought that I and the Squire would some day be one, I longed to make a clean breast of it. I longed to tell him that a very different figure from good Squire Broderick's crossed my mind many times a day, unbidden and horrible to me, who wanted to give every fibre of myself to him who lay a-dying.

For I cannot explain it, I can only say that it was so: dearly as I loved my father, the thought of him did not keep out every other thought. All through those weary watching hours, I was watching for other footsteps besides those that were coming—so slow and sure—to take away what I had loved all my life; black upon my heart lay the shadow of a deeper remorse than that of letting a dying man believe in a possibility that set his mind at rest. I wanted to see Trayton Harrod, that I might undo what I had done,—that I might tell him the truth about Joyce.

Yes, though I knew well enough that I

loved him far too well to think of another, it was not of my love that I thought, sitting there through the dark hours with the sense of that awful presence upon me that might at any moment snatch, whither I knew not, the thing that I had known as my dear father. I only wanted to see him that I might rid my conscience of that mean lie, that I might make him happy, and hear him say that he forgave me; and many is the time I started beside the still bed, thinking I heard that light firm step on the gravel without, or the click of the latch in the front-door as the bailiff had been wont to lift it.

But Trayton Harrod did not come, and, with the self-consciousness of guilt, I dared not ask for any news of him. It was not until more than a week after father's first seizure that I learned he had gone to London at daybreak on the morning following our parting, and had not yet returned. My heart sank a little at the news, although I knew he had intended going away for a little just about this time, and I guessed of course that he could have heard nothing of our trouble before he left.

Deborah said that one of the men had left a note from him the morning of his departure, but in the confusion of father's illness neither she nor I could find it, and I was reduced to sitting down once more to wait face to face with another grim phantom of Death besides that one that was keeping the house so quiet and strange for us all. Once I think mother said Harrod must be sent for, but nobody thought of it again, for everything was really swallowed up in that great anxiety, while we waited around that bedside hoping against hope, watching for that partial return of speech which the doctor had told us might perhaps be given to him once more.

The Rev. Cyril Morland came to see him, and told him all that he had been able to do about that scheme for the protection of little children which lay so near his heart. I well remember, though his poor body was half dead, how pathetic in its keenness was the effort to understand all as he had once understood it,—how touching the fire that still burned in his sunken eyes,—how touching the smile that still played about his white lips.

Yes, I remember it all. I remember how, after many attempts, he made me understand that I was to fetch that crayon sketch of the young man's head that hung above the writing-desk in his study, and put it opposite his bed. I remember how his eyes were turned to it then, as he listened to the good young parson's explanations of what had already been achieved in that branch of the great question upon which his mind had so long been concentrated.

The minister had scarcely gone out before Deborah came into the room with a message. She whispered it to mother: Captain Forrester was staying at the Priory, and had sent round to ask how Mr Maliphant did.

Father's eyes were closed, he did not open them, but I saw a look of suffering, as though a lash had passed over him, cross his features.

Mother sent Deborah hastily out of the room with a whispered reprimand, and father beckoned me to his side. As far as I could make out, he wanted me to send for Frank.

A few weeks ago how gladly would I have done it! But now I knew too well that it was too late, and when I saw the tell-tale flush of trouble on Joyce's face, and her quick glance of entreaty, I was loath to do father's bidding. I could see that she had it on her lips to tell him something—something that she no longer made a secret of soon afterwards: but how could any of us dare to disturb him—dare to do anything but simply what he wished? Even mother, much as it cost her to let me send that summons, would not interfere. We felt instinctively that the visit could do neither good nor harm. We need not have troubled ourselves. Father died before Frank came. He had seemed a little better; in fact, just for a day we had been quite hopeful. The Squire had been sitting with him, and when he left him alone with mother and came down-stairs, I met him in the hall. I had been waiting for him. I led the way into the deserted parlour, and the Squire—I fancied half unwillingly—followed.

"I hope I haven't kept you away," began he concernedly. "He's dozing now, and

your mother is with him. But he'll be asking for you again presently."

"Yes, I know, I know," answered I absently. "But—Mr Broderick, I wanted to ask you whether you don't think Mr Harrod ought to be sent for?" said I hastily.

He turned away his head. I could not help noticing that he looked embarrassed.

"I'm sure he can't know of father's illness, and I feel that he ought to be told," said I. "I know very well he would never choose this time for a holiday if he knew how very urgently his presence is needed. Everything must be going at sixes and sevens on the farm."

"I see that things aren't going at sixes and sevens," murmured he.

"You!" cried I aghast. "Oh, but that isn't fitting."

Still he looked awkward. "Don't you trouble your head about it," said he kindly. "You have enough to do without that. My bailiff has very little work just now, and he can as easily as not see to things a bit."

Something in his whole manner froze me, yet I cried eagerly, almost angrily, "But he

must come back. It's his duty to come back. You are too kind—you don't want to spoil his holiday; but that isn't fair, and not real kindness. He would much rather come back, I know. If you won't write to him, I will."

I spoke peremptorily, but something in the way the Squire now looked at me—pitifully, and yet reproachfully—made me ashamed, and I lowered my eyes. He came up to me and said, in a low voice, for I had raised mine, "Will you leave it all to me? Do. I promise you that I will do you right; and for you, just now, anything—everything but one thing, must remain in abeyance."

I could not answer, something choked me. He took my hand in his to say good-bye. "I thought he seemed easier, less restless to-night," said he.

I nodded, and he pressed my hand and went out. Not till the last yellowness had died out of the twilight did I go up again to the sick-room.

Mother sat on a low chair by the bed; her hand was in father's, and her head rested on her hand. There was no light, only just the greyness of the twilight. One might have

thought it was a young girl's figure that crouched there so tenderly. All through the years of my childhood I had very rarely seen any attitude of affection between my parents; I scarcely ever remember father kissing mother in our presence, although his unfailing chivalry towards her, and the quiet, matter-of-course way in which her opinion was reverenced, had grown to be an understood thing among us. I felt now that I had intruded on a sacred privacy.

Mother turned as I came in, and drew her hand very gently away from father's: he was dozing. She rose and walked away towards the window.

"Shall I bring the lamp, mother?" asked I.

I felt that there were tears in her voice as she answered. It was the first time I had been aware of this in all the time that father had been ill, she had been so very quiet and brave. I went up to her where she stood in the dim light of the window-seat, with her back towards me, and after a moment I kissed her reverently, as I never remember to have done before, save that once when she said that things would have been different on

the farm if our little brother had lived. Her tears welled over, but she did not speak. Only when I said, "He is better to-night, mother, don't you think so?" she nodded her head, and turned and went out of the room.

That night the wave we had been watching so long broke over our heads.

Mother had sat up the night before, and had gone to rest; Joyce held watch till midnight, and then I took her place. The hours wore away wearily through the darkness. Father was very restless, moaning often, and throwing his arms from side to side.

Once he had held his hand a long while on my head in the old, affectionate way, and had looked with mute, passionate entreaty into my eyes. What did he want to know? If I guessed, I did not satisfy the craving. I only murmured vague words here and there, smoothed his pillow and his brow, putting water to his dry lips, ministering to a physical thirst, and ignoring the bitterer thirst of the mind. I was a coward.

At last he fell into a restless doze. I left the bedside and went to the window. The dawn was breaking; behind a rampart of

purple clouds a pale streak of orange light girdled the marsh around; sea there was none, or rather it was all sea,—silent waves of desolate land, silent waves of distant water, and over all a sullen surf of mist that hid the truth; out of the surf rose the far-off town, like some dark rock amid the waters, statelier than ever above the ghostly bands of vapour that crossed its base, and made the crown of its square belfry loom like some fortress on a towering Alpine height. Purple was the town, and purple the cloud battlements, but overhead the sky was clear where one patient yellow star waited the coming of day.

At the foot of the cliff the water was up in the tidal river; it lay blue and cold amid the dank, white mist. I remembered the day, six months ago, when I had stood and watched it just as blue and cold against the white winter snow. I had thought it looked colder than the snow in its iron depths,—I had thought it looked like Death. Yes, how I remembered it! It was the first time I had ever thought of Death.

I went back to the bed. I fancied father

had moved; but he lay there quite still, with his face upturned, and a strange blue-greyness on it. I stood over him a long time, till my hands were so cold with fear that I could scarcely feel if his had still the warmth of life. I thought I would call mother, but the breath still came faintly from his lips, so I waited awhile, creeping softly back to the window, whence I could see the living world.

The yellow star was no more. For slowly from behind the purple ramparts a glory of silver rays grew up: the purple became amethyst, the sullen cloud-cliffs broke into soft flakes of down; they cradled the rising sun, whose fire flushed their softness; they bore him up until he was full-orbed above the horizon; then suddenly a rent ran across them, and it was day. But the white mist still lay just as thickly on the ground; it was grey with shadows, and the water was cold, and the wide, wide sea of surf-bound marsh was desolate.

A sound came from the bed. My heart stood still. It was so long since we had heard father speak, that to hear him now seemed like a voice from the grave.

"Meg," he said distinctly.

I did not turn. He repeated the word, and it was his own voice, and I went to him. He lay there just as I had left him, excepting that he had turned just a little on his side, so that the portrait of his friend should be the better within his view. The same blue shadow was on his face.

"Meg," said he slowly, "mother will be very lonely when I'm gone. You will take care of mother?"

I sank slowly upon my knees, so as to bring my face on a level with his. I wanted to hide it away from him, but by a great effort I kept my gaze upon him.

"Yes," I answered firmly.

"You've always been a good girl—my right hand," continued he. "Take care of them both."

His voice was getting weak; I could see the drops of perspiration standing on his brow. I tried to get up, that I might call mother and Joyce, but he held me fast.

"The Squire—trust the Squire," he murmured. "He loves you as I loved your mother." And then, with a smile of peace,

he added, "The Squire said he would take care of you all."

I was too much awed to speak, but I put my lips gently to his hand. It was quite cold, and a shiver ran through me.

His eyes were closed, and I drew my arm as well as I could from his grasp, and flew to the door.

In a moment I was in the room where mother and Joyce lay resting together; my presence was enough to tell them what was the matter.

But when I got back to father, his eyes were open again—fixed on that picture opposite to him.

"'Now we see through a glass, darkly,'" he murmured. "Ah, Camille, I have done what I could;" and then, "God has a home of His own for the little ones."

He was wandering.

"Laban!" cried mother with a low cry.

A smile broke through that grey shadow, as light had burst through the purple clouds when the sun rose.

His lips seemed to move as if in some request.

"'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding,'" began mother, in a broken voice.

There was a long silence in the room, and then a sound : it was a sob from our mother's heavy heart.

His voice was still for ever.

CHAPTER XL.

On the day of father's funeral the sun shone, and all the summer had come back. Against a pale, fair sky, dashed with softest clouds, golden boughs of elms made delicate metallic traceries, and crimson creepers shot like flames across the grey walls of sober cottages. Even passing birds had not all deserted us, and swallows swept again around the ancient ivied aisles of the old cathedral, under whose shadows we laid him away in the earth.

We put him under the yew-trees beside our little brother John, with his face toward the sun's setting behind the pine-trees. Every one said it was a beautiful place for him to rest in; and Joyce wept her simple, silent tears over the hopeful words spoken by the Rev. Cyril Morland, whom mother had

chosen to read the service. But as for me, my heart was too hot and rebellious to shed any tears, or to see any hope or comfort. I hated the sun for shining so brightly, the world for being so fair, and folk for thinking it natural enough that an old man should come to an end of his life.

Yes, they spoke of it sadly, compassionately,—all those many folk who followed him to the grave; folk to whom he had told his thoughts, whom he had helped and taught, and with whom he had sympathised in his life; folk who would not have been what they were without him—whose friend he had been, who would never find such another to lead them! But for all their honest tears, they spoke of it as a worthy life brought worthily to an end,—they could think of his grave as beautiful; whereas to me God was cruel to have taken him, and no place in the world could be anything but cold earth that hid him from my sight.

Towards mother and Joyce my heart was soft, because of the promise I had given him with his darkening eyes looking into mine; but even towards Joyce I was sore when I

saw her bend her head towards Mr Hoad as he held open the gate of the graveyard for her, and it was with a grim feeling of satisfaction and no sense at all of the unfitness of the occasion that I turned aside from his outstretched hand, and said in a loud voice, that every bystander could hear, "No, Mr Hoad, I don't think I shall ever care to shake hands with you again. You don't fight fair. It is through you my father lies there, and I'll never forgive you."

I swept on after mother without even giving one glance at the angry face I left behind, without listening to the suppressed murmur that ran round, without even seeing the vexed, distressed look on the Squire's face close beside me. My heart was very sore, and not the less so because I had missed around the grave one face that I had made quite sure would be there.

The Squire and I had never spoken again of Trayton Harrod since that day when he had begged me to leave the recalling of him to his discretion. I don't think I had seen him more than once during that time, and then it had been about the arrangements for

the funeral, when I should not have liked to speak to him on such an apparently trivial matter, however much I might have wished to do so. But all through the dreadful days when we three had sat silently in the darkened parlour, hearing no news from without save messages of condolence and flower-tokens of humble friendship, brought in by old Deb with her swollen eyelids — all through the time when we were waiting till they should take away from us for ever that that was left of what had once been our own, there had come sudden waves of unbidden remembrance mingling with my holy sorrow for the dead; and interwoven with my regrets over the much I might have done for my dear father, which it was now too late ever to do, were other genuinely contrite thoughts, which I resolved should not be without fruit.

I wanted to make amends for my wrong-doing, and Trayton Harrod would not give me the chance. Where was he? Surely by this time he must have heard of our trouble. How could he remain away? And as the dull hours wore on from morning to evening and from evening to morning again, I longed

to see him with a heart-sick longing that not even my tears could quench; I longed to see him, though his face might be ever so stern, his voice ever so cruel, his hand ever so cold.

But he did not come, and on the fourth day after the funeral, mother, awaking slowly to the knowledge of outer things and people, asked for him. "Meg," she said, "it's very strange that Mr Harrod hasn't been near us all this time of our trouble. Is he sick, do you know?"

"I haven't heard, mother," said I faintly. "But I believe he has been away."

"Away!" echoed mother. "Well, then he might have come back again, I think. I wouldn't have believed he was such a fair-weather friend as that. I thought of him so differently."

My heart swelled with a bitter remorse: for deep down there was a little voice that told me that if Harrod was away, I was not without blame for it.

"You and he haven't had a quarrel, have you?" said mother after a bit.

"A quarrel!" repeated I faintly. "Oh no!"

"Well, I'm glad of that," answered she. "He's a nice lad, and it's a pity to lose a friend. I fancied he might have been speaking to you about something you didn't choose to be spoken to about. I'm glad it isn't so. I wonder what keeps him away. And not so much as a line. Well, I daresay he'll be back to-morrow."

Her voice dropped wearily: in truth, she cared very little whether he came or no; there was only one whom she longed for—and he could never come again.

But I—sorely as I too longed for that presence that she mourned—*I* cared whether Trayton Harrod came again, and when he did not come I went to get news of him. Joyce thought it very dreadful of me to go for a walk when our dead had been but so lately laid to rest, but Joyce did not know. She too, perhaps, wondered at his absence, but she did not know, as I did, the reason for it.

I went out of the house, across the garden, down the cliff where I had seen him disappear on that weird, moonlight night a month ago—down on to the marsh. The sun had gone

behind the hill, for it was afternoon, but the sky was clear and limpid, the sea blue beyond the mellow marshland; along the banks of the dykes thorn-bushes studded the way—rosy-flushed from afar, but close at hand coral-tipped on every slender branch; and the water, shorn of its green rush-mantle, lay still and bare to the sky.

I walked fast till I came to the white gate that divides sheepfold from cattle-pasture, and then I turned round to look back: if I chanced on the Squire I should get news; but there was not a living thing to be seen on the land,—I was alone with the birds and the water-rats. The cattle had been called off the marsh when the stormy weather set in, and I had forgotten to bring even the dog with me; it was so long since I had been for a walk.

But the dear familiar land soothed me with its sadness. Far away upon dykes where the scythe had not yet mown the rushes, broad streaks of orange colour followed the lines of the banks or were dashed across the stream, tongues of flame in the sunlight. In the distance blue smoke soared slow and straight

into the pale air from the fires of weed-burners in the ploughed furrows, and a shadow crossed the base of the town whose pinnacle was still white in the afternoon light. Along the under cliff of the Manor woods the crimson of beeches made gorgeous patches of painting upon the sombre background of pines, and larches held amber torches up among the paler gold of elm-trees.

God's earth was very fair, but why had He taken away all that made it glad? Not far from here had we two first met in the rain and mist; here had we started the lapwing in the green spring-time and scared the cuckoo from its nest, usurped; here had we many a time followed the game, and learned the ways of birds and beasts; here had we gathered the hay and the harvest, and watched the sheep-shearing; here had we crossed the plain in the thunder and lightning of the storm.

And all these things would happen again, —the spring and the summer and the winter would come with their sights and their sounds, their life and their duties; the marshland would always be the same, but would it

ever be the same again to me? Ah, that day I did not think so!

A shot sounded in the woods. It was the Squire's keeper after the pheasants. It awoke me from my dream, but I must have been so still that even the rabbits thought I was not alive, for two of them ran out across my path.

Was I alive after all? I shook myself and went slowly on to where the marsh meets the road, and then I turned up across the ash-copse on the hill—bare already of leaves—and took the path towards "The Elms." Yes, I had come out to hear news of Trayton Harrod, and I would not go back without it: somehow and from somebody I would learn where he was, and why he had gone.

I walked fast when once I got in sight of the house: my heart was beating. It stood there—serene and solitary as usual—a bare, lonely, uninviting house, looking out from its quiet height upon the downs and the sheep-pastures, the sun-setting and the sun-rising.

There was never anything human about "The Elms." It seemed to be intent just upon its daily work and its daily duties, and as though it might think that anything which

interfered with them was not to be considered or countenanced. That day it looked more inhuman, more uninviting than ever; its white walls seemed to grin at me; its straight, tall chimneys—whence no friendly blue smoke sought the sky—seemed to point jeeringly away into the void. My heart sank as I climbed the hill and opened the gate of the farmyard. I knew why the place looked more uninviting than ever—it was deserted, the shutters were closed, the house door was bolted; it was as if some one had died there, as some one had died at home.

I knocked once, loudly, in desperation, but I knew that nobody would come. Nobody did come: nobody came, though I knocked three times; all was still as the grave. As I walked down the hill again at last, I met Dorcas's niece with her "youngest" in her arms.

"Lor', miss, who would ha' thought to meet you so soon after your poor father died!" said she reproachfully. "I've just been down to the village to fetch some soap."

"Oh, I see. Is Mr Harrod expected home?" asked I lamely.

"Home!" repeated she, gaping. "Why, he's left the place this month past. All his traps went last week."

I suppose my face showed how my heart had sunk down, for she added, half compassionately, "Didn't you know he was going, miss?"

I pulled myself together. Miserable as I was, there was an instinct within me that did not want strangers to guess at my misery.

"Oh yes, I knew he was going," said I carelessly. "But of course we have had too much to think about at home for me to remember just when it was."

"Why, yes, of course," echoed the woman in the commiserating tone of her class under such circumstances. "Ah, farmer was a good man, and none can say different! And, to tell the truth, many's the one have thought it queer Mr Harrod should choose this time to go away. But he always were odd, and I suppose we must all look to our own advantage. There's no more work to be done on poor old Knellestone farm—so folk say—and I suppose he had heard of

something as would suit him. Ah, it's very sad after all the years the family have been on the place."

I dared not think what she meant, although I knew well enough; but this other blow had stunned me and I could not speak, even had I chosen to bandy words, about poor father's affairs with a village gossip.

"I'll go up with you and look round the house," said I.

"It aint tidied yet, miss," answered she apologetically. "I was just going to wash and settle it all up."

"Never mind," insisted I. "I want to look for a book,"—and I led the way up the hill.

"Lor'! you won't find anything there," laughed she, following. "There isn't anything in the place."

I went in nevertheless. But she was right, he was gone indeed. The homely room was deserted where I had sat in the window-seat that summer evening reading words of Milton that I did not understand, and watching the rising storm and the sheep cropping sleepily over the grassy knolls. There was

not a book left of all those books that I had envied, and had thought he would think the better of me for reading; not a pipe on the rack above the mantel-shelf; not a sign to show that he had ever been there. And yet I saw it all before me just as it had been that day; I felt that unseen presence that I had never seen there, just as if he might open the door at any moment and come in.

The woman left me for a moment, and I sat down on that window-seat once more. The sun was setting firily, as it so often set beyond those wide marshlands and their boundary line of downs; the valley was full of blue mist—blue as a wild hyacinth—against which the bended, broken, broad-topped pine-trees laid every branch of their dark tracery, abrupt, unsuspected, alert with individuality, strangely full of a reserved irregular grace. I remember the picture, yet I scarcely saw it; it must have fastened itself upon my memory, simply because it fitted so well with my own mood. Oh me! when I had last been there Harrod had not seen Joyce, and now I said from my heart,

"Would to God he had not seen me!" Yes, I said it from my heart; so much so, that I was not content with mere regrets—I was resolved that Trayton Harrod should not go out into the world with that lie of mine in his heart,—not if I could help it.

I started up. I would go to the Squire; I felt convinced now that the Squire knew all about Harrod's departure. The Squire could at least tell me where he was, that I might write to him. I walked across the empty room, and at the same moment Mr Broderick opened the gate of the yard without. Everything was happening just as it had happened that day; but oh, with what a difference!

The Squire's face grew pale—I could see that through the tanning on it. He had not expected to see me here, and his hand trembled as he took mine. But he said gently, "I'm glad to see you out again. I came to look round the place. I hope we have been lucky enough to sublet it till your lease is up."

From a business point of view the words swam over my head, but they were ominous.

I felt that they confirmed what the woman had said. "You think we can't afford to keep on 'The Elms'?" I asked absently, not daring to put the question that was at my heart.

"I think it would be unwise," answered he evasively. "I think any one who manages your property will have enough to do without it."

"Mr Broderick," said I suddenly, looking him full in the face, "has Mr Harrod left us for good?"

"Yes," he answered firmly, "for good."

I could not speak for a moment. Then trying hard to steady my voice, I said, "Did you know it?"

"Yes," he answered, "I knew it."

He no longer looked at me now, nor did either of us say anything for some time. He spoke first, saying, in quite an ordinary voice, "I don't think he was quite the fellow for the place. An older man with fewer new ideas would have been better."

"Was that the reason that he left?" asked I, in a muffled voice, although indeed I knew well enough that I was talking idly. "Father

did not send him away because of his new ideas."

The Squire brought his eyes round to my face. "I don't know the reason that he left," said he. And although I said nothing, I suppose there was some sort of an appealing look in my face that made him go on. "I only know that he came to me the night before your father was taken ill, and asked me, as a friend, to see after his work for him until a substitute could be found, because he was obliged to leave immediately. I asked no questions, and he told me nothing. Of course I was glad to do what I could for—you all."

He was silent, but I felt his eyes upon me. I met them—with that tender pitying gaze in them—when at last I lifted mine.

"Mr Broderick," said I,—and I felt that my voice faltered,—"will you give me his address? I must write to him. There is something that I must say to him. I thought I should have seen him again, but—I must write it."

He took out his note-book and wrote it down, handing me the leaf that he tore out.

I don't think I even thanked him, I don't

think I said good-bye,—I just walked out of the door. The Squire followed me for a few steps. "I want to have a talk with you soon about your father's affairs," said he, trying to reach a cheerful and commonplace tone of voice.

"Yes—some day," said I, in a dull way. And I don't think I even turned round again to look at him.

It was very rough, very ungrateful of me, but I couldn't bear another word. The only thought in my heart was to be at home—to be alone—to write my letter. I tore down the lane under the pine-trees in the gloaming. I ran so fast that I did not even notice two figures that passed me under the shadow of the wall on the opposite side; their heads were close together, and the woman, who was much shorter than the man, clung very close to his tall, slim person. It was not till some days afterwards that it occurred to me who those figures had been.

I had not even a word for poor Taffy, who sprang upon me reproachfully as I opened the gate of the farmyard. I had forgotten to take him, but I had no thought even for that

dumb and faithful companion just then; I only wanted to write my letter.

I wrote it, but it was returned to me from the dead-letter office. Two days afterwards Deborah, taking courage at last to clean up the poor deserted parlour, found another letter in the old Nankin jar on the mantelpiece, which served well enough as an answer to mine, although it was sent so long before it: it was the letter which Trayton Harrod had written to father the day before he left.

I had been in the garden, and when I came in mother sat with it in her lap. There was a shade more trouble than before on her worn white face whence the dainty tints had all fled in these hard weeks. Directly I came into the room I knew what the letter was. I had never had a letter from him—no, not a line. I don't remember that I had even seen his handwriting, but I knew whose the rugged uncompromising capitals were the moment I looked at them. I took the letter up and read it, and when I had read it I found some means of slipping it into my pocket: I wanted to keep it—it was the only letter I could ever have from him, but a

strange love-letter truly. It was written in his curtest, most uncompromising style, saying what it had to say and no more. Somehow I was glad that father had never seen it; it did my friend such grave injustice. It made no sort of excuse for quitting the place as he did; it merely said that as he felt he was useless there, he had decided to accept a post in Australia, which would, however, oblige him to leave Knellestone without the usual warning. It enclosed the sum of three months' salary, which he would have been supposed to forfeit for leaving without notice. It gave no address, and left no message: that was all.

"It's very odd," said mother, looking at me as I read it, and slowly opening and shutting her spectacles in a nervous manner. "I don't at all understand it. But I suppose he had something better in view—and the farm is not what it was. It shows how one can be deceived in folk."

And that was my punishment. I was obliged to let people think that they had been deceived in him. It was on my tongue to tell mother what I could. Was it cowardice

that kept me back, or was it that I scarcely knew what to tell? There seemed so little that was not bred of my own fancy—only I knew well enough that my fancy was right.

And as the time passed, I knew more surely than ever that my fancy was right. He had said in his letter that there was nothing to keep him in the old country, but if he had seen Joyce as I saw her, surely he would have guessed at my lie,—he would have known that there *was* something to keep him!

Two days after the discovery of Trayton Harrod's letter, my sister told me that she had broken off her engagement with Frank Forrester.

There had never been quite the same understanding as of yore between us two since that horrible scene of passion, when I had been so cruelly unjust to my poor Joyce. She would have forgiven me, no doubt, but I was too proud to invite it. That day, however, she told me quite simply that she had broken off her engagement.

"I ought never to have made it, Meg," said she. "I did not think it was wicked

then; I liked him to love me. But now I think it was wicked. It may be wrong to depart from one's word, but—I can't marry him."

She spoke in a half apologetic kind of way—as she had, no doubt, written to him. She had not seen those two figures pass along under the wall in the twilight, as I now remembered for the first time that I had seen them. But I said nothing: I was dumb. I think from that time forward I was dumb for a long time—dumb with remorse and the sense of my own utter helplessness,—standing alone to see the river run by, which I had once fancied I could set in motion or stem at will.

But her face—though stained with tears, which mine was not—was calm, her blue eyes were serene and trustful as ever. Yet, ah me! how guiltily did I creep about her, how hungrily watch for every piece of news—for her!

But he was gone—and it was through my fault.

CHAPTER XLI.

WHAT more is there to say? If I had written all this ten years ago I should have said that there was nothing more to say—I should have said that my life was ended. But now I am not of that mind. Thank God! there is more to say, and though there have been sad hours to live through, the haven has been reached at last.

When father was dead and buried, they told us that we should have to leave the Grange. I can remember how the blow fell on me. Reuben had just buried Luck, the old sheep-dog, under the big apple-tree.

"The Lord 'll have to take me now," he had said, with tears in his dim eyes. "But I'd sooner die than see the old place go to the bad. I knowed what it 'ud be when the master was called, and now that the dog's

gone as well there's no more luck for us. Ay, if he'd ha' stuck to Early Perlifics we shouldn't ha' seen old Knellestone come to the hammer."

I don't believe I felt the thrust, I don't believe I ever saw the comic incongruity of the situation, when, leaning forward on his spade and gazing tearfully at the grave of his old, dumb comrade, he had turned to me saying confidentially, "There 'll be a rare crop of apples this year, miss. There's nothing for an apple-tree like a dead dog."

But Reuben was a philosopher and I was no philosopher; and of the days that followed, —the days when Deborah went about with a grim, wise air, as one who had known all along what would happen—the days when mother wandered aimlessly from the chairs and presses to the old writing-table where father had sat so many years, and the eight-day clock that had summoned us as children to breakfast and prayers,—of those horrible days I cannot speak. I dare not remember the guilty feeling with which I felt mother's eyes upon me when the Squire delayed to come for that "business talk" that he had

asked leave for. I might have found spirit once more to scorn Deborah's more openly expressed upbraiding, but mother's silent reproach made my heart sick.

We were wrong, however, to doubt the Squire. He came in spite of Deb's cruel, covert taunts, in spite of mother's hopeless eyes. If he had not come earlier, it was only because he was waiting till he had good news to bring. I can see him now, as he walked once more into that parlour where we had had so many eager discussions, so many friendly meetings and half-fancied quarrels, so many affectionate reconciliations! The late autumn sun shone in through the three deep windows upon the worn old Turkey carpet and leathern chairs, upon the polished spindle-backed seats that stood on either side of the hearth—one empty now for ever; it almost put the fire out, and touched the copper fire-irons into flame. I suppose it was the sun that made the Squire's face look so ruddy and so radiant.

Radiant it most certainly was, and yet, at the same time, half shamefaced too, as he said that he had just come from a meeting of

the creditors, and that he had every reason to hope that father's affairs would be satisfactorily arranged. I don't think I believed him at the time; I think I was almost hurt when he met my trembling question, as to whether we should have to leave Knellestone, with a laugh. But oh, what a relief was that laugh from the visits of condolence we had had!

He did not forget father although he did not speak of him in words: the awe that had surrounded the deathbed was gone, but not the sacred burden that it had left. Yet I did not understand when he said that the creditors had been satisfied. Even when the dreaded day of the sale came, and mother kept her old friends in chairs and tables and presses, and linen within the presses, and Joyce kept her favourite cows in the dairy, and I even the mare that had been the innocent means of first bringing romance within our quiet family,—when the farm was not even deprived of a single one of the mowing and thrashing machines that had caused so much strife,—I, ignorant as I was of business, never even guessed in

what way an "arrangement" had been come to!

It was old Reuben again—sitting by the chimney-corner crippled with rheumatism, or, as he himself expressed it, with all his constitution run into his legs—it was poor old Reuben who had told me the truth. Shrewd Deb knew it, and was silent; but Reuben, too shrewd or not shrewd enough to be silent, told me the tale: if Squire had not bought in all the stock and the furniture before it ever came to the hammer, we shouldn't have been in the Grange now, living practically very much the same life as we had always lived.

Ah me, I knew well enough why the Squire had taken such pains to conceal from us all that he had done anything more than effect a compromise with the creditors! But I ought to have guessed. If I had not been so much wrapped up in my own personal pains and feelings, I *should* have guessed it, and when I next met him I nerved myself to speak on the subject. How well I recall his explanation! "Folk in the country grow to depend so on one another that I couldn't do with strangers at the Grange while I'm

alive," he had said; "so you must forgive me if I played a game to serve my own ends. The place might have stood empty ever so long. Farms do nowadays."

We must have been riding eastward over the downs, for I can remember that the wind blew keen in our faces, and that the sky was leaden overhead, almost as dull as the wide, dull marsh below it: it was winter. I know that, even at the time, I recalled another night when I had ridden with the Squire; then the west was raging crimson behind us, and the moon rose yellow out of the sea: it had been summer.

"There is no one else in the world who would have done for us what you have done for us, nor any one else in the world from whom we could take it," I had murmured in a trembling voice. "It is for father's sake."

"It is not all for your father's sake," the Squire had answered softly, with grave and tender face, his blue eyes shining down on me with a deep, bright light.

By a sudden impulse I recollect holding out my hand to him. "I know you are my

friend and I am your friend," I had said. "We shall always be friends till we die."

And all through the dreary days that followed, that friendship, that needed no words to tell and that no parting could weaken, warmed my empty heart at a time when the world seemed to hold no further joy, nor even such comparative content as a respite from remorse.

For, alas! Joyce slowly faded and saddened before my eyes, and all my passionate love for her came back, making the thought of her wasted youth—her tarnished loveliness, her happiness uselessly spoiled through my fault—almost heavier than I could bear.

For it was spoilt though she spoke no word. At first the tall, slim figure—more quakerly neat than ever in its straight black gown—went about the household duties just as serenely as before, and the face, so dazzling fair a flower on the dark stem, shone as innocently content as of yore. I could scarcely believe that she could have seen that cruel letter with its upright, rugged characters, that seemed to have sent away the last drop of blood from my heart: her

hope must have been high, or she could never have kept so patient a countenance.

But however high it may have been, it began to fade. I had said to myself that Joyce could not feel, but—ah me, how little can we know how much other people feel? I could see her feeling through the tremulous sensitiveness of the face that once seemed to me so impossible to ruffle,—I could hear it through the thin sound of her timid voice, in her rare speech and rarer laughter,—and I knew that my loved sister was unhappy. Yes, she was unhappy; life was as dead to her as it was to me, and it was I—I, loving her—who had killed her joy for her, and killed it wilfully. May no one whom I love ever know what it is to feel remorse!

A whisper ran round the village that Joyce Maliphant was pining away her beauty for love of the gay young Captain who had once courted her, and who was now going to wed with Miss Mary Thorne, the heiress. Deb told me of it, she had heard the rumour coming out of church, but I don't believe we, any of us, thought that it mattered much what Frank Forrester did. He could never

have made Joyce happy, why should he not make Mary Thorne happy? There had been tears in her eyes when the news of his accident had come; there had been no tears in Joyce's.

No; what really mattered was, that my sister's face was growing paler and thinner, and that at last the day came when they told us that, unless we could make up our minds to part from Joyce for a while, we might have to part from her for ever.

I hope I may never feel again the heart-sick pang that went through me as the doctor said those words. I had thought that no such pang could be worse than that I had felt when father had told me he was going to die; but this was worse, for Joyce was young, and had the right still to a long and happy life, and if she was deprived of it, it was I who had deprived her.

I went to work with an aching spirit to arrange how it should be that Joyce should leave us for warmer lands. Mother had a married brother living at Melbourne, and to him it was decided at last that Joyce should go for a couple of years. We found her an

escort in some friends of the Squire's, and the only little grain of comfort I had in the whole matter was that, if Joyce was to leave us, it was to go to the same country whither Trayton Harrod had fled a year before. But Australia was a large field, and unless they were to meet by the purest accident, Trayton Harrod was not likely ever to seek Joyce out.

Was it some such faint and wild hope, I wonder, or merely the feeling that I could not part from that dear heart without making a clean breast of my sin to it, which made me say what I did when the last moment came? I don't know. I only know that as we stood there in the little waiting-room of the London Docks, while mother stooped from her usual shy dignity to beg the kindness and care of this unknown friend of the Squire's for her suffering child, I felt suddenly that I could not let Joyce go from me with that lie weighing on my heart,—I felt that I *must* have her forgiveness!

I cannot imagine how I had endured so long without it. I had hungered for *his* forgiveness, whom I had wronged less cruelly,

because I owed him less devotion, and had been able to live side by side with her without asking for her pardon whose life I had so wrecked.

Many a time in those past months I had started to find the Squire's perplexed eyes upon me, following mine that were fixed upon Joyce, and I had blushed with shame, knowing what it was that put that look in me which puzzled him; and many a time I had vowed that I would abase myself and tell her all, yet never had found the courage. But now, when the last chance was slipping from me, the courage came. It came, I think, because Joyce stood suddenly revealed before me in the grandeur of her simple goodness, her power of silent and loving sacrifice; it came because I had no fear, because I was ashamed of my very shame, because I was sure of her forgiveness.

She stood with her hand in mine, her figure very tall and slim in the straight, black gown, her face very fair and fragile in the frame of the neat little close bonnet. She might have been a nun, so quiet and orderly her outward demeanour, so calm her beauti-

ful face, and yet when I looked again I saw that there were tears in the blue eyes that looked away from me to the tangled mass of shipping in the dock, and to the confused network of masts and rigging that lay black against the leaden, wintry sky.

"Oh, Joyce, darling," I cried, seizing her hand wildly, "don't cry! I can't bear it."

She did not answer,—she was afraid of trusting herself to speak; but, true to her perfect unselfishness, she turned to me and smiled. "You'll get well, you know," I went on with determined cheerfulness—"you'll get quite well, and come back to us very soon."

Still she smiled that heart-breaking smile, nodding her head, however, as though to confirm my cheerful words. Then came my burst of confidence. "If you were *not* to come back quite well," said I in a low voice, "I think, Joyce, I should die. It's all my fault."

At that she spoke. She did not seem surprised at my words, but only anxious to deny them so as to remove any pain of my self-reproach.

"Oh, no, no, Meg," she said softly. "Not your fault, dear. Things like that are never any one's fault."

She thought I only meant that my love for Harrod had stood in the way of her accepting his, because *she*, brave and unselfish in what I used to call her coldness, would have given him up to me.

But I couldn't let her think that I had meant only that. "Joyce," said I firmly, "if it hadn't been for me Trayton Harrod would have married you."

I saw that the name hurt her like the lash of a whip. "Oh, don't, don't!" she murmured, with pain in her eyes.

"I beg your pardon," said I humbly, "but I must tell you. I can't let you go away without telling you the truth. Oh, Joyce, my poor Joyce! however much it pains you, I must tell you. I don't mean only what you think. I don't mean only that I didn't go away, that I didn't behave as generously towards you as you would have done towards me. I mean—— Oh, Joyce, how can I tell you? But I was mad with jealousy—and I told him that you loved Frank. I sent

him away from you." I had hurried the words out without preparation, I was so afraid of being interrupted—and now I was frightened.

Every drop of the blood that was left in that poor wan face fled from it. I thought she was going to faint, but she stood firm, only her eyes seemed to turn to stone, to see nothing.

"Oh, Joyce, darling, don't look like that!" cried I in an agony. "Speak to me! Say something!"

She closed her hand over mine, and her lips moved, but I could not hear a word.

"I shall never, never forgive myself so long as I live," murmured I, a sob rising in my throat; "but if *you* do not forgive me, Joyce—— I think I shall die, Joyce."

"Poor Meg!" murmured my sister at last, and then the lump that had been rising in my throat broke into a sob, and the tears rushed to my eyes.

For a moment I could not speak. I got rid of my tears as well as I could, and looking at her I saw,—yes, thank God! I saw that her eyes were wet too.

"Can you forgive me, Joyce?" I faltered. "Yes, I think *you* can. You are good enough."

"Forgive you!" echoed she faintly. And, her sweet mouth breaking into the tremulous smile that was its familiar ornament, she added, "Dear, *you* have been unhappy too."

They were few words, but what more perfect expression of tenderest forgiveness could there be? I wanted no more. I knew there was no bitterness, that there never would be any bitterness in my sister's heart towards me.

There was no one in the waiting-room—mother had gone out on to the wharf with the strange lady. I put my arms round Joyce's neck, and drew her face down to mine. "God bless you!" I said reverently, and I think for the first time in my life I felt what the words meant.

"It's all for the best, dear," added she gently, leaning her cheek against my hair. "You know we never really do alter things that are going to happen by anything we do. It's arranged for us by a wise Providence."

It was the simple faith that had always guided her life; it had often annoyed my more impetuous and self-willed spirit, but it did not annoy me now—there was a soothing in it.

But there was no time for further speech; mother came back again—it was time to go on board. I busied myself with the luggage, and with talking to Joyce's escort—a kindly good-natured couple — and left mother and daughter together.

The parting was over all too quickly, and we were left standing on the wharf alone — mother and I — watching the big black mass steer its way slowly among the crowd of shipping, watching the tall black figure on the deck, until, even in imagination, it faded from us, and we looked but on the interminable rows of black masts against the lurid sunset of a bleak winter evening.

When we were safe in the cab again — homeward bound — I did what I had only done once in my life before, and that was on the night when the mare threw me and I had first fancied that Trayton Harrod loved my

sister—I put my head down on my mother's breast and wept my heart out on hers. It was selfish of me, for I should have thought of her grief, and yet I do not think that it intensified it; I think, somehow, my tears did her good.

She said nothing, but she stroked my hair tenderly, and from that moment there was opened up between us a new vein of sympathy that had never been there before, and that left something sweet in life still, even in the sad and empty home to which we came back.

It was an empty home indeed. The Squire could no longer cheer its solitude with his genial presence. He had gone abroad. The Manor was shut up, and there was no sign of life about the dear old place that held so many happy memories, but the sound of the keeper's gun in the copses above the marsh, and the cawing of the familiar rooks that circled round the old chapel at eventide.

I dared not complain, things might have been so much worse. The farm was still our own. A new bailiff and I managed it together;

but though I had reached what, a while ago, would have been the summit of my ambition, it was gone. I no longer cared to have my own way ; save for a somewhat vain struggle to keep up father's theories as far as I could, I let the new man do as he liked ; he made the farm pay us a moderate income, and I asked no questions. My duty to mother was the plain thing before me, and I threw myself into that now, as I had thrown myself into personal ambition before, — the farm must be made to keep her comfortably.

But for all my devotion to her, these were dreary days. With my new passion for self-sacrifice, I refused to leave her for the rambles of old, and the want of fresh air and exercise told on me a bit. The only things that broke the monotony of our life were our letters from Joyce, and from the Squire. He wrote to me regularly, telling me of all that he was seeing, of all that he was doing,—the kind letters of a friend, from whose thoughts it made me happy to think I was never long absent. I would scarcely have believed, a year ago, that it would have made me as low-spirited as it did,

when one of the Squire's letters was a little delayed. I think I missed them almost more than I should have missed one of Joyce's, for —save for knowing that she was better, and as I faintly began to hope, a little happier— her letters were so entirely unlike herself, that they gave one but scant satisfaction; whereas the Squire's, without breathing a word that was out of the common, were full of himself and his own characteristics. In spite, however, of these red-letter days, the hours were long hours, and the days grey days for me. I worked as of old through summer and winter, spring and autumn, flower and fruit, sowing and reaping, but the seasons were not the same to me as they once had been. I loved the sunless days, with their fields and mysteries of cloud, soft promises of a far-off heaven, ever changing, ever unknown depths,—I loved them as I could not love the sunshine. I was not always unhappy, for I was young, and out of the past upon which I mused, many a note of suffering had had its answering whisper of joy; but upon the marsh there lay a shade which had

not been there when I was a merry, thoughtless girl.

. . . . . .

Thus far had I written, and I thought my task was finished; but to-night, as I lean out of my window, watching the pale moon sink cradled in grey clouds, and make a misty silver path across the lonely land that is woven into my life, I want to reopen my book that I may set down in it one last word.

It is not half an hour since I stood down there on the cliff waiting for a carriage to come along the white road that crosses the plain. Two were in that carriage—the sister whom I had loved and betrayed, the man whom I had loved and for whom I had betrayed her. They were returning together from a distant land, where they had met once more. My heart was full of thankfulness, and yet—when I felt the aspens shiver again in the night breeze as they had done that evening ten years ago—I seemed to hear the deep voice in my ear, and to feel the cold strike to my heart as it spoke.

But it was not *his* voice that spoke; another stood at my side, one who had come back to me from a long parting, the friend of my life, the lover of ten years who had never spoken but once of his love, who had never put a kiss upon my lips. I scarcely know what he said — simple words enough, but they told me of his tender pity and untiring sympathy, they opened the flood-gates of my burdened heart, and I told him all my tale. I shrank from nothing. I told him of my wild, unreasoned passion that, deep as it had been, was not all that I could imagine love might be; I told him of my selfish sin, of my long and bitter remorse, of my thankfulness that the punishment was removed, and that Joyce was coming back to me happy in spite of my great wrong to her. I did not ask myself what this longing to confess to the Squire meant in me, and yet the confession was by no means an easy matter; and when all was told my heart sank within me at his silence, and I felt as though I could not bear it if *he* should be ashamed of me—if he should take away his friendship from me because I haddone an unworthy thing.

But I suppose one does not love people nor cease to love them for what they do or for what they leave undone; for certain it is that when the Squire spoke at last there was something in his voice that told me he was not ashamed of me—that same "something" that had been so silent all these years, that I sometimes wondered if it was still alive.

The Squire has gone home, and all the house is at rest. But I still look out of my little attic-window whence I have seen the sea for so many years. Below me a mist lies upon the dyke like a white pall upon some cherished grave. It is just such a night as that night ten years ago—only with a difference: the dim plain is not so cold, the light has a promise of brightness. And in my heart, too, there is a brightness which I am almost afraid to believe can be mine. I am happy because Joyce is happy, because Joyce is beautiful once more as she was beautiful when I first wanted a lover to love her. But it is not only thankfulness for the stain blotted out, peaceful resignation to the inevitable, which makes light in my soul to-night. There is a new picture growing

slowly out of the clouds as they part and melt around the moon; there is a new harmony coming to me at last out of the very monotony of the Marshland.

Above the lonely plain the night is blue and vast.

THE END.

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